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ABSTRACT

Mobile preschool units were developed in New Zealand in the 1970s in response to concerns about adequate provision of early childhood education in isolated areas. There are currently nine such units operating under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education. Each unit is comprised of two kindergarten teachers who travel with equipment to several communities each week. A study undertaken in 1988 obtained data for evaluating the effectiveness of the mobile units. Data for each unit were gathered by means of observations of teachers, children, and parents; teacher interviews; and parent questionnaires. Formal results of this study are presented in this volume. Results discussed include: (1) the work-related views and experiences of teachers; (2) the nature of the interactions between teachers and children, and teachers and parents; (3) the views of parents and parents' committees on mobile preschool units; and (4) an administrative perspective on mobile preschool units. Appendixes include a list of the members of the advisory committee and background information on the preschool teachers. A total of 27 references are listed. (BC)

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Mobile pre-school units

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MOBILE PRE-SCHOOL UNITS IN NEW ZEALAND

(Volume I)

PS 020355

Shelley Kennedy
Brenda Ratcliff
Evelyn Henry

Research & Statistics Division
Ministry of Education
Wellington
October, 1990

Disclaimer:

Opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily coincide with those of the Ministry.

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We would like to thank all the people who have made this report possible. First and foremost, our gratitude goes to the mobile pre-school unit teachers who worked so hard for us by filling out questionnaires and forms, gave time to talk to us during a quite lengthy interview, and who tolerated us for so many days (under what cannot have been easy circumstances for them) while we carried out the fieldwork for the study. We very much appreciate their help and cooperation.

As well, we would like to thank: the many parents who contributed to the survey by completing questionnaires and talking informally to us during our visits to the mobile units; members of the advisory committee for their helpful comments and advice; and to all the others (local kindergarten associations, the YWCA, senior teachers, and District Officers - Early Childhood Education) who made time to participate in the study.

Our thanks also go to Neil Leckie, Director of the Early Childhood Education Division of the Department of Education when mobile pre-school units came into existence, for providing us with valuable information on the (early) history of mobile pre-school units in New Zealand.

Within the Research and Statistics Division we would like to thank Ngaire Bennie for all her support and for producing the graphs, Mary Donn for proofreading, and Katrina Smith for her patience and effort in the typing of a series of drafts and the final manuscript. Thanks go, too, to others in the Division who helped in various ways.

Finally, we would like to thank Fiona Esau of the Learning Media Division (Ministry of Education) for her design work.

'MOBILE PRE-SCHOOL UNITS IN NEW ZEALAND': A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE REPORT

Background

Mobile pre-school units were developed in the 1970s in response to concerns expressed about the adequacy of provision for early childhood education in isolated rural (and sometimes urban) areas. There are currently nine mobile pre-school units (under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education) operating throughout New Zealand. Eight of these are recognised as free kindergartens while the ninth is administered jointly by the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), its local kindergarten association, and the Ministry. A mobile pre-school unit comprises two trained kindergarten teachers who travel with equipment, in a van which is provided, from a base location to several different communities each week and run a kindergarten programme for children (and their parents) in each of the places visited.

A study of the mobile pre-school units was requested by the former Department of Education's[1] Early Childhood Education Division. The purpose of the study was to obtain comprehensive and up-to-date information about the units because, at the time the study was commissioned, consideration was being given to extending the service but no evaluation of their operation or impact had ever been undertaken.

Methods

A case study approach, whereby each of the mobile units was visited for a period of five (or, in the case of the YWCA unit, nine) working days, was adopted. During the fieldwork period at each mobile unit, formal - as well as more informal - observations of teacher-child and teacher-parent interactions were carried out; information was also gathered on such matters as the nature of the programmes run by the units, the number of groups visited each week, travelling time, accommodation available to groups, and length of sessions. In addition to the observations, interviews with teachers were conducted, and parents, mobile unit management committees, and early childhood education individuals and groups (eg senior teachers and kindergarten association staff) were surveyed by means of questionnaires.

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[1] The Department of Education became the Ministry of Education on 1 October 1989.

Organisation of the Report

The report on the study has been divided into two volumes: Volume I contains more 'formal' data based on all nine mobile pre-school units while Volume II contains a series of (illustrated) case studies, one for each mobile pre-school unit in New Zealand.

The chapters contained in Volume I discuss, in turn, data on the mobile units obtained by means of the teacher interviews, teacher observations, and the questionnaires for parents, parent committees, and others. The final chapter presents a summary and analysis of the main findings (these are outlined below) and provides suggestions for how the report may be used.

The case studies contained in the second volume are almost wholly descriptive: each contains a brief historical background, followed by an account of the mobile unit's most salient features - for example, the number of groups visited, the number of children, and parents, who attended on a regular basis, the nature of the communities being served, the philosophy of the unit with respect to children and parents, the distance travelled by the teachers each week and time spent in travelling, length of sessions (including time taken to unpack and repack equipment at the beginning and end of each session), and so on. In addition, from information gathered during the observation periods at each mobile unit, the case studies include a description of all sessions attended by the researchers (covering, for instance, the range of equipment made available to the children and the sorts of activities they took part in, the structure of the session - ie whether it was mainly free play or a combination of free play and small and large group work, and the nature and extent of parental involvement during sessions). The facilities available for each group visited by a mobile pre-school unit to meet in are also described.

Findings of the Study (Volume I)

The following is an outline of some of the major results of the study as presented in Volume I of the report:

- The mobile pre-school units have had an impact on a large number of families throughout New Zealand.

- There is a continuing demand for (more) early childhood education services in the areas served by the mobile units.

- While all but one of the units is classified as a free kindergarten and therefore subject to the same rules and regulations as standard kindergartens, data suggest that guidelines drawn up specifically for mobile pre-school units may make them even more effective.

- While respondents to the various questionnaires used in the study felt that mobile pre-school units in general provided 'good' learning experiences for children, there was considerable concern expressed at the infrequency with which mobile units were able to visit groups. Respondents from rural areas believed that children attending the units were considerably disadvantaged, when compared to their counterparts in towns and cities, because of this. (Respondents associated with the urban-based unit expressed similar views; this was because they lived in communities with comparatively few services.)

- Infrequency of visits by the units was, however, offset to a considerable extent by the relatively small size of many of the groups visited by the units. This allowed a high level of intensive teacher-child (and teacher-parent) contact, not usually found in a 'conventional' kindergarten setting.

- Despite the strong wish of parents and teachers (and others) for mobile units to visit groups more often, there was little evidence that parents ran sessions themselves on days when the units did not visit. This suggests a possible area for development in the way the units operate if discrepancies between the provision of pre-school education in isolated areas and that in other parts of New Zealand are to be minimised.

- Although teachers who took part in the study were very positive about their positions as mobile pre-school unit teachers, they indicated that potential appointees needed to have special skills and qualities (eg a high level of flexibility, the ability to interact with a wide range of parents as well as children, and the ability to tolerate the frustrations of limited availability of equipment at given sessions, limited time, and variable conditions to run sessions) to equip them for the job.

- There was a wealth of data to suggest that many parents (especially those in the most isolated areas) gained as much as, if not more than, their children from their association with a mobile pre-school unit.

- Finally, the study clearly indicated that the service provided by mobile pre-school units was highly valued by the communities which received it, and that, although certain changes or modifications were desired, the perception was that any reduction of the service would be a major setback for the communities concerned.

The Case Studies (Volume II)

A major purpose of the case studies presented in Volume II was to try and show not only the similarities but also the differences between the mobile pre-school units - differences which, although to some extent were obviously influenced by teacher characteristics (teaching style, personality, etc) cannot entirely be explained in that way. Other important variables for explaining differences seemed to be, for example, the nature of the communities (eg their relative isolation, the socio-economic and/or cultural mix of the population) in which individual groups were based, the extent of community interest in and involvement with the mobile unit, the nature and extent of parental involvement in the pre-school programme and in the running and organisation of the mobile unit, the nature of the accommodation available for groups to meet in, the frequency with which groups could be visited, the distance that teachers from each mobile unit had to travel in the course of a week, and the number and age range of the children who attended groups.

Use of the Case Studies

Although the descriptions provided in the case studies represent the mobile units as they were at a specific period (1988), it is believed that - despite undoubted changes in certain particulars - the account of what occurs in the course of ordinary sessions held by mobile pre-school units is essentially as valid and pertinent now as it was when the fieldwork was carried out. Further, it is also believed that the account captures, at least in spirit, the sort of work carried out by many others who work in early childhood centres of all types throughout New Zealand. It is hoped, therefore, that the intention of the case studies - that is, to provide an insight into what happens at mobile units (and, in the broader view, early childhood centres in general) which is both interesting and informative - has been fulfilled.

Copies of the full report '__Mobile Pre-School Units in New Zealand__' (Vols I and II) by Shelley Kennedy, Brenda Ratcliff and Evelyn Henry may be obtained (free of charge) from the Research and Statistics Division, Ministry of Education, P O Box 1666, Wellington, New Zealand.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Background

Mobile pre-school units, which were developed in the 1970s in response to concerns expressed about the adequacy of early childhood education provisions in isolated rural (and sometimes urban) areas, became the subject of the present research at the request of the former Department of Education's[1] Early Childhood Education Division. The Research and Statistics Division was asked to obtain comprehensive and up-to-date information about the units. Such information was seen to be important in view of the considerable changes in early childhood education and in community needs which had taken place since the first Government initiated mobile pre-school unit was established in Marlborough in 1976[2]. Further, although it was felt that the mobile units would have evolved and changed over the years in response to the early childhood education (and other) needs of their respective communities it was not clear just what changes had occurred or how the units were currently operating (eg the amount of child - and parent - contact time that was allowed by each unit's schedule, how far the unit travelled in the course of a week, how many children and parents attended, where the groups served by the units met, and so on).

Fieldwork for the present study on mobile pre-school units was carried out in 1988. Very basically, a mobile pre-school unit comprises two trained kindergarten teachers who travel, in a van which is provided, from a base location to several different communities each week and run a kindergarten programme for children (and parents) in each of the places visited. In general, the mobile pre-school unit teachers carry most of the equipment that they use during sessions with them in their vans. The equipment is then unpacked, and later repacked at every venue visited. Most of the time, teachers - with varying degrees of help from parents - run their kindergarten programmes in borrowed facilities (eg community halls, old farm cottages, empty classrooms etc); the groups served by the mobile units seldom have purpose-built accommodation.

There are currently nine mobile pre-school units (under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education) operating throughout New Zealand. Eight of these are recognised as free kindergartens while the ninth is administered jointly by the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), its local kindergarten association and the ministry. The map overleaf shows the location of the mobile units.

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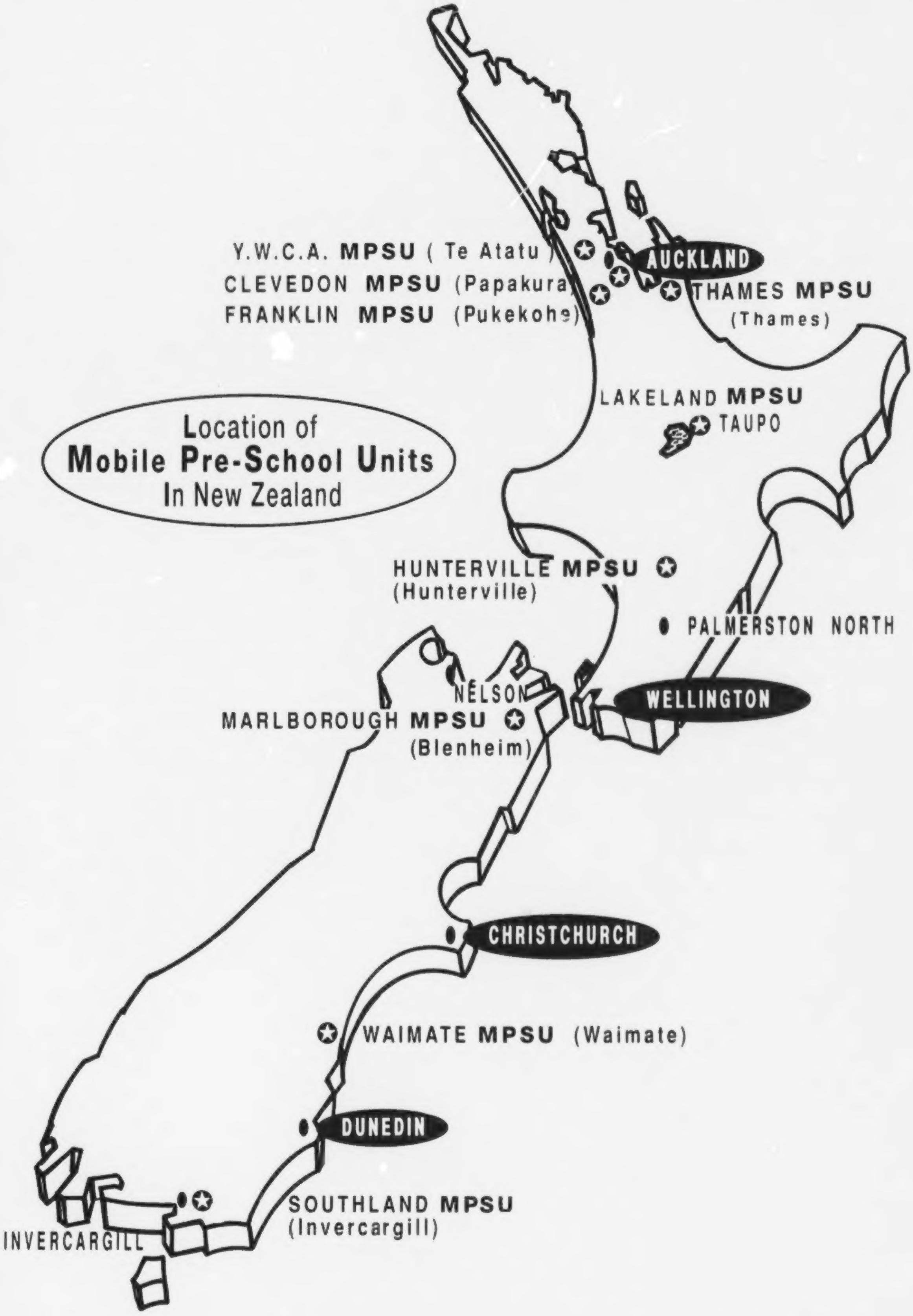
[1] The former Department of Education became the Ministry of Education as at 1 October, 1989.

[2] Not counting the urban-based YWCA unit at Petone which, as explained later in the chapter, began earlier in the 1970s as a YWCA rather than a Government initiative.



Location of **Mobile Pre-School Units** In New Zealand

Y.W.C.A. **MPSU** (Te Atatu)
AUCKLAND
CLEVEDON **MPSU** (Papakura)
THAMES **MPSU**
(Thames)
FRANKLIN **MPSU** (Pukekohe)
LAKELAND **MPSU**
TAUPO
HUNTERVILLE **MPSU**
(Hunterville)
PALMERSTON NORTH
NELSON
WELLINGTON
MARLBOROUGH **MPSU**
(Blenheim)
CHRISTCHURCH
WAIMATE **MPSU** (Waimate)
DUNEDIN
SOUTHLAND **MPSU**
(Invercargill)
INVERCARGILL

Details of the nature of the research study that we conducted are given below, following an outline of the mobile pre-school units' history, and discussion of some relevant theory and research findings.

The Reasons for Establishing Mobile Pre-School Units in New Zealand: A Brief History

For many years concern had been expressed at the lack of opportunity for **all** pre-school children in New Zealand to receive early childhood education and/or care. An early major investigation into this (and other) aspect(s) of early childhood education was conducted during 1970 and 1971 by the Committee of Inquiry into Pre-school Education. In November 1971, the Committee released its report (often referred to as the 'Hill Report'). It was concluded by the Committee of Inquiry that there were definite inequalities in the service currently provided such that children in certain parts of the country were less likely than others to have access to pre-school facilities and that some children with special needs (eg with physical or learning impairments) often missed out as well[3].

Amongst those regarded as having special educational needs or being "in particular need of pre-school education" were children designated as "isolated". The Committee of Inquiry stated in their report that they had received:

> **"...many pleas on behalf of children who live in rural areas where the normal pre-school facilities are unavailable, and on behalf of those children who live in families which remain isolated from their community even in an urban setting." (p.63)**

While the Committee felt that provisions for children from isolated urban families could be made without too much difficulty in many cases, it was realised that children from farms or small country communities presented a more difficult problem:

> **"Here it is not a matter of persuading parents of their child's needs - often they are only too aware of them. It is a matter of making facilities available. At present this child is provided with the radio broadcast *Listen with Mother* and perhaps sees *Sesame Street* on Television, but he [she] has nothing to compare with the pre-school opportunities which are available to children in more populated areas and his [her] needs are as great, if not greater, than theirs." (p.63)**

It was further stated:

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[3] Barney (1975), in his study Who Gets to Pre-school?, also wrote that in the mid 1970s not only was there often not a **choice** of early childhood services but there were still "thousands of families waiting for **any type** of quality pre-school education." (p 266)

> **"The country child enjoys many advantages, not the least of which is the time he [she] can share with his [her] parents as they go about their work, but perhaps what he [she] lacks most are opportunities to mix regularly with children of his [her] own age in circumstances which lead to group experiences, co-operative play, and conversation. But to bring him [her] together with other children as often as desirable presents immense problems." (pp.63-64)**

The Committee made three main suggestions to help overcome the inequalities caused by lack of existing pre-school facilities for 'isolated' children, one of which involved forming "a type of playgroup" which could qualify for special assistance, and another that, where there were "conveniently located" primary schools, steps could be taken to provide some pre-school sessions there each week, as a joint effort between the junior class teacher, parents, and a local pre-school adviser. The third suggestion, "in support of the other two forms suggested above...or as an alternative to them" was the "development of a mobile pre-school service in suitable rural areas." (p.103) The Committee visualised such pre-schools in the following way:

> **"Working from smaller centres these units could provide weekly sessions for the children in neighbouring small communities. They would carry the materials and basic equipment together with a teacher who would guide the sessions and support the mothers in conducting the home programmes which would be so necessary between the visits of the mobile unit." (p.64)**

It was the 'Hill Report', therefore, that was the original instigator for the eventual development of (rural) mobile pre-school units in New Zealand.

In a submission (July 1975) to the Minister of Education entitled 'Provision of a Mobile Pre-school Unit in a Rural Area' the statement "...all children should have the opportunity for pre-school education" was quoted from the 'Hill Report' as the basis for the proposal. It was further commented in the submission that although "Playcentres and kindergartens are, and will remain, the major agencies providing pre-school education in New Zealand...they cannot serve children who live in areas where there are not enough children to provide the minimum roll for these services - 50 for a kindergarten and 10 for a playcentre." The writer of the submission, therefore, advocated setting up a mobile pre-school unit because:

> **"The quality of the education provided through family playgroups could be significantly improved through regular visits from a trained pre-school teacher, who could conduct some of its sessions and provide guidance for parents on the sessions they supervise."**

The first **rural** mobile pre-school unit in New Zealand - initially established on a trial basis by the Department of Education - began operating in the Marlborough area in 1976. Based in Blenheim, its purpose was to serve several small rural localities which did not have any alternative pre-school education facilities. The unit's van was the property of, and maintained by, the Department of Education but the unit was "designated as a kindergarten under the Blenheim Free Kindergarten Association and administered by that association with the help of committees in the localities served." (Department of Education files). The Marlborough unit began with one trained kindergarten teacher but, by 1978, with the expansion of its service, a second teacher was employed. Sessions were conducted in existing buildings, such as community halls.

In a Department of Education circular dated 22 May 1978, it was stated:

> **"The [Marlborough] unit has proved to be a suitable means by which some communities without the usual pre-school centres (often on account of insufficient population) can be provided with an effective pre-school service. The proposal accords with the Government's policy to ensure that early childhood education is generally available, where feasible, as an integral part of the education system by 1980."**

The adjudged success of the Marlborough mobile pre-school unit in fulfilling the purpose for which it was designed - ie to serve isolated children (and their parents) in rural areas in as cost effective way as possible (in this case, without incurring the cost of a permanent building) - contributed greatly to approval being given for the establishment of further mobile units.

The Government announced in the 1978 Budget approval for the setting up of five additional units - at Franklin, Hunterville, Taupo, Waimate, and Invercargill - on a basis similar to that used for establishing the mobile unit in Marlborough, that is, with the Government supplying: a van; funds for equipping the unit, and for converting, running and maintaining the vehicle (and eventually replacing it); the salaries of the head teacher and teacher; and, the sessional and administration grants as for a free (Grade 0 or Grade 1) kindergarten. The five units all commenced operating in 1979. A further two units, to be established at Thames and Clevedon, were later approved as well. They were established on a comparable basis to the other six units controlled solely by kindergarten associations (ie those not run in conjunction with the YWCA) except that the relevant association had been responsible for the purchase of the vehicle.

Although the 'Hill Report' had earlier stated that the problem of isolated urban children could be fairly easily catered for (eg by persuading parents to take their children to existing facilities and/or by establishing more early childhood facilities in developing urban areas) it was subsequently decided that mobile units - to be run as a partnership between the YWCA, the local kindergarten association, and the Department of Education - would be beneficial for designated urban communities, to serve as a bridge between isolated families (especially Pacific Island and other immigrant families) and the community at large. During 1977 and 1978, therefore, two further YWCA mobile pre-school units were established "in needy urban areas" (ie those "with a high incidence of social problems") in West Auckland (Massey) and Christchurch[4]. The YWCA had already been operating - with relatively little financial assistance from Government - a mobile pre-school unit in the Petone (Hutt Valley) area, mainly for immigrant Pacific Island families, since 1974/75. When the other two YWCA units were approved, however, this unit qualified for a level of financial assistance equivalent to that received by free kindergartens (including the mobile pre-school units not run by the YWCA) for operating costs.

The YWCA unit in West Auckland, one of those visited during the course of this study, continues to operate but the YWCA units in Christchurch and Petone were eventually discontinued as their clients gradually became integrated into their communities and other sorts of pre-school facilities became established.

By the third term of 1980, therefore, all nine units which were the focus of the present study were fully operational.

Guidelines for Establishing and Administering Mobile Pre-School Units

Based on experience of the existing mobile pre-school units, the Department of Education, in consultation with professional organisations such as the NZ Free Kindergarten Union, the NZ Free Kindergarten Teachers Association, and the NZ Playcentre Federation, developed general guidelines for establishing and administering the operation of a mobile pre-school unit. The guidelines first and foremost emphasised that:

> **"...because each unit will be serving different communities with different needs and in different geographical areas, there must be a degree of flexibility to permit local variations."**

With this proviso in mind, the (1981) guidelines advocated (amongst other things) that:

1 a mobile unit's itinerary and minimum weekly schedule should be agreed upon by the local kindergarten association, the District Officer - Early Childhood Education, and the Department of Education, and should be developed only after consideration of the effects on other pre-school services in the area, and consultation with staff there if applicable;

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[4] From Department of Education files.

2 groups visited by the mobile pre-school unit each week should, in general, be composed of not less than a minimum of five children aged 2 $^1/_2$ years or over; and,

3 that existing local playgroups should be consulted in any proposal for establishing a mobile unit and that once confirmation for a unit has been given, local groups should be invited to become part of the mobile unit. It was then suggested that those groups wishing to avail themselves of the services of the mobile unit would have the role of forming a committee, including appointing a representative to attend management committee meetings; arranging for suitable accommodation in which to meet (in consultation with the kindergarten association, education officer and teachers); paying rent; and developing (again in consultation with teachers and others) a supply of equipment and play resources additional to what could be brought on the van. The role of each group was also seen to include assisting teachers with the setting up, and running of sessions; packing up again afterwards; running additional sessions between visits of the van where these are desired; taking responsibility for handling group finances (including money received from the controlling body or by means of local fundraising efforts); and encouraging other parents whose children are not receiving pre-school education to join the group and participate in its operation.

4 With respect to teachers, the guidelines stated that they would "be responsible for the day to day functioning of the mobile unit as determined by the association[5] and approved by the department. The head teacher will be responsible to the association for the educational programme of each group after taking into account the needs of the children and consulting and involving the parents." (Department of Education files.)

From data presented later in this report it will be shown how closely the mobile pre-school units adhered to the original concept of a mobile pre-school unit, and to the early guidelines, as outlined above.

In the early stages of many of the mobile pre-school units the vehicles provided were ex school-service buses which had had to be converted (eg by having the seats removed) to make them suitable for the storage and transportation of equipment. These were found to be large and inconvenient, expensive to run and subject to break-downs which disrupted the service that teachers were trying to provide and discouraged members of groups eager for the service. Eventually, all of the buses were replaced by modern vans, making it easier for the teachers and ensuring a more reliable service.

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[5] The Guidelines stated that they were developed "with the establishment of units under the control of kindergarten associations particularly in mind" ie they were not always necessarily directly relevant to units run by the YWCA.

In addition to improvements in the type of vehicles used, the operation of the units has almost certainly become more streamlined over the years in other ways as well, as the first mobile unit teachers were very much 'pioneers', having to learn their job as they went. Although, as will be shown later, newly appointed mobile unit teachers still appear to have very little induction (at least in a formal sense) into their positions, there is now at least a mobile unit 'history', with the general procedure for mobile units well established, making it somewhat easier for current teachers than for their predecessors. (The availability of a place of their own in which to carry out administration and planning work and to store equipment has also facilitated the work of most mobile pre-school teachers: initially, in the majority of cases, no such provisions had been made.)

Information (although often sketchy) on Department of Education files reveals that all mobile units have had a number of changes in itinerary since their instigation, together with changes in the accommodation available for groups to meet in. Other developments (eg in the types of programme run at each unit, the extent to which parents are involved both during and outside session times etc) have also occurred in response to community needs (and factors such as the philosophy and personality of different teachers). More specific details about each mobile unit are presented in the individual case studies contained in Volume II of this report.

Early Childhood Education: Why Have It?

Although it has been pointed out[6] that it is **not** necessarily essential for all pre-school children to attend an early childhood education centre **provided** that the (home) environment in which the child grows up has all the ingredients necessary to stimulate the child's social, emotional and cognitive development and to foster the development of effective, high quality language, most educators and child development specialists tend to agree that there would be few children who would not benefit in some way from being able to attend an early childhood education facility.

As the 'Hill Report' (1971) stated:

> **"Ample evidence exists to show that not all parents are qualified to provide the basic essentials of physical and psychological care for their children. Many mothers, and fathers too, because of their background, temperament, health, or way of life are unable to provide the extended environment that is considered adequate for the growing child...where, as so often is the case, either knowledge, wherewithal, or time is lacking,**

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[6] For example, by Professor Lilian Katz, a prominent US researcher and spokesperson in the area of early childhood education, in an address to staff from the Early Childhood Education (and other) Division(s) of the former Department of Education, 10 August 1988.

> **parents require assistance in the education of their pre-schoolers. It is not a case of usurping the function of the parents. It is a matter of providing a service which is an extension of the home, which involves the parents and which supports them in providing the conditions which promote growth in breadth as well as development in depth." (p 270)**

Smith and Hubbard (1988a), in similar vein, stated that early childhood centres can be viewed as:

> **"...agents who share child-rearing with parents when the demands of young children are pressing and during a time when families alone are ill-equipped to meet these demands...Supportive links between home and school are likely to mean a less threatening transition for the child, more coherence and less confusion between the rules and activities of home and pre-school and a greater chance of being understood and treated as an individual at the early childhood centres as well as at home." (p 176)**

As well as the potential education and other benefits that accrue for the pre-schoolers themselves, therefore, early childhood education centres are believed to also have an important function for supporting parents in their role as caregivers. Smith (1988) refers to further research which suggests that in order "to be truly effective those who bring up children need supportive networks of friends, neighbours, relatives and resources, such as early childhood centres." (p.227) However, she also stated that: "Unfortunately, such networks are not available to all families" a situation which makes it even more important for there to be an "adequate provision of early childhood care and education services as well as other support services for the family" and for early childhood services "to be aware of and sensitive to the needs for support of families with young children if they are to carry out their role successfully."

The 'Hill Report' pointed out, too, that the provision of sound pre-school education can support parents and children in another way as well: allowing the child and the parent to have regular spells away from each other can help "avoid the tensions which can arise where each is confined to the other's company", thereby improving the overall quality of the parent-child relationship. (p.27)

It is factors such as these that led participants of a group meeting to discuss the curriculum for early childhood education and care (Lopdell Centre, Auckland, February 1988) to assert (amongst other things) that:

> **"We affirm the belief that high quality early childhood education benefits children, families and society";**
>
> and,

"We believe that access to quality early childhood education services is a universal right of children and families." (Department of Education files.)

What Constitutes a 'Quality' Early Childhood Education Programme?

Assuming that it is accepted that there should be early childhood education centres to provide education - in the widest sense of the term - and support for pre-school children and their parents, the question of what should form the basis of the programmes that centres provide is of paramount importance. What constitutes a 'quality' programme is a much debated topic and one that is currently of primary focus with the ongoing development of charters for early childhood education and care centres under the new Ministry of Education administration.

There is a wealth of theory and research available on what early childhood education programmes should contain, therefore it seems appropriate to treat this topic, in the present instance, in very broad terms only. In Education to be More, the Report of the Early Childhood Care and Education Working Group (1988), for example, early childhood care and education is defined as:

> **"...education, care and learning that *occurs* in a safe and healthy environment, that *involves* parents to some degree (ranging from complete to a limited involvement), and that *develops* the potential and quality of life of young children in the present and in the future." (p 6)**

The Working Group further stated that in order to arrive at a developmentally appropriate curriculum:

> **"Staff need to ... plan integrated programmes which foster the all-round development of individual children as well as challenging the whole group, if children are to benefit fully from early childhood services. Without dominating the children's activities, the adults should guide the play and consciously enrich the children's language." (p 18)**

Smith (1988) cites ample evidence to show that fostering the 'all-round development' of children involves a careful handling of environmental variables to ensure that children have plenty of opportunities, in an atmosphere of trust, warmth and caring, for effective social (most particularly, by interacting with their peers, but also with adults outside of their immediate home environment), cognitive, and physical development, the development of appropriate sex roles, and the acquisition and ongoing development of quality language.

Subsequent chapters in the present report give considerable insight into the nature of programmes that were provided by mobile pre-school units at the time the fieldwork for this study was carried out.

Previous Research/Literature on Mobile Pre-School Units in New Zealand

There has been almost no prior research specifically related to mobile pre-school units in New Zealand. Packman (1985) provides the major exception. He included the Marlborough mobile pre-school unit in his study of rural services in New Zealand. Packman advocated closer cooperation between all those working in various pre-school centres, schools, health and social welfare groups, libraries, and so on in order to improve services for the people living in rural areas and small communities. However, he found that this often did not happen, for example:

> **"Community pre-school workers, itinerant teachers and the work of the mobile kindergarten have a great deal in common and in many ways are doing the same sort of work, and yet there is little co-operation between the community pre-school workers and the mobile kindergarten in Marlborough. This is partly because of the way the system has been set up." (p 61)**

Packman also commented in relation to the original concept of mobile pre-school units having a role in encouraging parents to run their own sessions on days when the van did not visit. Based on his visit to the Marlborough mobile pre-school unit, he stated:

> **"The mobile kindergarten at present does not set up groups and move on but is offering a conventional kindergarten service for limited hours. Only one of the [seven] venues organises sessions separate to when the van visits." (p 62)**

Packman reported that one of the other groups previously ran an additional weekly session but stopped when the van began to visit their group twice a week instead of only once, while another group ceased additional sessions "because of differences between the parents". He further noted that the teacher at the time was "aware of the need to make the venues more independent of the van and will try to encourage parents to run their own sessions". (p.62)

The question of whether parents did or did not run additional sessions is an issue which is taken up later in this report, as is the extent to which mobile pre-school unit teachers liaised with other early childhood education workers in their general working area.

Sandra Coney (1986) in her work Every Girl: A Social History of Women and the YWCA in Auckland included a short account of the early days of the Auckland YWCA mobile pre-school unit. In interviews with women who had worked in a variety of community services in the West Auckland area during the 1970s, Coney learnt that the need for pre-school facilities was:

> **"...desperate. There was only one State kindergarten and it had a two-year waiting list. Many children could not get in until they were four and a half years old. Many of the women were isolated and without transport. A need was seen for a mobile pre-school unit which could service a wide area of West Auckland." (p 273)**

The YWCA therefore negotiated with the Department of Education which agreed to pay the salaries of two teachers, while a grant from the Child Health Foundation enabled the YWCA to buy a stationwagon and an initial supply of equipment.

The first two teachers to work on the mobile unit concentrated on Massey, a new housing area. Although, Coney reports, mothers had already started two playgroups themselves they were in need of help: one group was about to disband because the mothers did not have the knowledge or equipment to maintain the interest of the children, who had become bored and reluctant to attend. One of the women from that early group stated that the teachers:

> **"'...brought in all these activities we'd never even thought of. The children had a lot more to do and soon became interested again.'" (p 274)**

Coney stated:

> **"Within twelve months the unit was serving seven pre-school groups, five in Massey, one in Swanson and another in Ranui as well as providing equipment and support for groups in Henderson Valley and Piha. By 1981, the unit was working for 136 women and 214 children and it would continue to grow." (p 274)**

From 1978, as part of the service provided by the YWCA mobile pre-school unit, camps for mothers were held. These grew out of YWCA camps held for children when the head teacher realised that similar camps "would be valuable for the women she worked with, some of whom hadn't even been out to see a film for five years". Coney went on to write that:

> **"The first camp for forty children and twenty mothers was held over three days... A creche was provided so the women could participate fully in the programme. There were sessions on assertiveness training, crafts,...women's health..., self-defence..., dance and drama..."**

One of the course organisers was reported to describe the camp as:

> **"...very exciting. We provided a chance to learn new skills and an opportunity for play. There was a strong emphasis on women communicating with and supporting each other. We looked at what women could do to change their lives." (p 274)**

Coney also interviewed some of the participants of that first camp for women. According to one solo mother it gave her much needed "reinforcement for parenting skills":

> **"'The camp helped me see that I can cope on my own and what I am doing is not wrong and is not hurting my son. It helps to know someone else has confidence in me.'"**

Another participant who had not been away from her husband for five years said:

> **"'We were busy all the time but, unlike at home, never felt tired.'" (p 274)**

The pattern of work set by those first teachers on the YWCA unit was still evident when we visited that unit in 1988, ie the emphasis was on supporting and 'empowering women', as much as on working with the children.

A small, relatively informal study of the Southland mobile pre-school unit was carried out in 1982[7] to "find out if the client groups were satisfied with the running of the unit; to clarify the roles of the parents and staff; and to see if the needs of all parties were being met." Although the survey found that parents were generally very positive about the service provided by the mobile pre-school unit there was evidence that "the Southland Mobile Unit showed a need for the teachers to develop a more comprehensive approach to their parent work." (Department of Education files.) As a result, an application was lodged by the then District Officer - Early Childhood Education for increased expenditure to enable the teachers to visit the committees for each group on a regular basis to discuss aspects of the running and organisation of the mobile unit and to develop parent education sessions. The application was approved in April 1983. (More details from the survey are included in the case study on the Southland mobile pre-school unit, contained in Volume II of this report.)

Although not specifically related to mobile pre-school units, a brief survey of rural playcentres by the New Zealand Playcentre Federation (Revell, 1987) carried out "to establish their effectiveness and to ascertain whether the needs of rural families were being met" has some relevance to the present study in that the purpose of each type of pre-school facility is similar.

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[7] This study appeared to have been carried out by the then district advisor on pre-school education but the report does not make this clear.

Revell reported that a major finding of the survey was that many parents revealed that they found their rural playcentres were as valuable for themselves as for their children in terms of the opportunities for social contact with other adults, and the support which resulted from such contact. This need for many parents to have a social outlet for themselves was clear from information reported above on the YWCA unit and, again, is an aspect of the mobile pre-school units that is discussed at some length throughout this report.

In terms of the continuing need for early childhood education services such as mobile pre-school units in rural areas - and some urban areas as well - there is recent evidence that there are parts of the country which still do not have sufficient early childhood education facilities available despite the continuing expansion of standard centres such as kindergartens and playcentres, the rapid growth of Nga Kohanga Reo and Pacific Island language nests, and the work of itinerant and community pre-school workers. Allan and Critchlow (1989), for example, concluded in their report Access to Pre-school Education and Care that:

> **"While there are many problems in generalising, some parts of the country clearly appear to have "better" provision of early childhood facilities in terms of total numbers [than others]."**
>
> **As a general statement, most cities show a reasonable level of provision, however some parts of cities stand out as having clearly inadequate provision. These are often the expanding fringe areas (eg South Whangarei, West and South Auckland), but also may be in the older parts of town experiencing demographic changes from an old to a more youthful population...(p 13).**

Allan and Critchlow further stated that:

> **"Regionally, Taranaki, more remote parts of King Country, inland Hawkes Bay, some parts of Manawatu, Marlborough, parts of Nelson, North Canterbury, Otago and Southland are inadequately provided for. The small communities in some of these areas may provide for the surrounding community, but in most of these areas small communities are few and far between. A few mobile units which were not included in the analysis, may make a small difference to the level of provision in these areas."**

Findings such as those presented in Allan and Critchlow's report, therefore, seem to provide clear justification for the existence of mobile pre-school units quite apart from the outcomes of the sorts of programme that they provide for children and their parents.

Summary

In this chapter, a brief historical background to the establishment of mobile pre-school units has been provided and an attempt has been made to provide a framework for the question of 'Why early childhood education centres (including mobile pre-school units) are important and/or necessary.' The little research that exists in relation to mobile units, together with data from studies of other topics which have some bearing on the existence and organisation of mobile units have been seen to raise some interesting points, points which have been considered in the chapters which follow.

As the general brief for this study was to 'find out' what mobile units are like, what they **do**, and for **whom**, it seemed appropriate to adopt a 'case study' approach (primarily **descriptive** in nature): this meant visiting each mobile unit in turn - important because of the diverse communities which the different units serve - in order to obtain the information, as determined by the research objectives (Chapter 2), that we required.

Smith and Haggerty (1979) refer to a trend towards a study of 'process' in early childhood research in addition to 'end result' research ie to an increasing recognition amongst researchers that what actually happens to children, and parents, **while** they are participating in a pre-school programme is in itself an important measure of quality education and/or care just as measures of outcomes are.

As the purpose of the present study was not to attempt to measure the effects of attending mobile pre-school units in terms of subsequent achievement, behaviour and so on, a careful description of 'process' at each mobile unit was therefore important. To this end, an adaptation of an instrument designed to systematically observe the inputs of teachers into the (kindergarten) environment (first developed by Honig and Lally, 1975 and subsequently used in New Zealand by Smith and Haggerty, 1979; Meade, 1985; Smith et al, 1986; and Smith et al, 1988 - with slight modifications each time to suit it for its specific purpose) was used during the fieldwork phase at each mobile unit. (The observation instrument or scale is described more fully in Chapter 2.)

A variety of other strategies/methods were also employed to gather additional information in order to provide as full a description of mobile pre-school units as possible. Again, these are detailed in Chapter 2.

CHAPTER TWO : METHODOLOGY

As stated in the introductory chapter, the overall purpose of the present study was to provide (descriptive) data which could be used to evaluate the effectiveness of mobile pre-school units as a means of delivering early childhood education to given communities. The specific research objectives are detailed below, followed by an account of the procedures and instruments used to collect data relating to each objective.

Research Objectives

The study aimed to obtain information on each of the nine mobile pre-school units in New Zealand with respect to:

1 The nature of the children and parents who were (at the time the fieldwork for this study was being carried out) catered for by the mobile pre-school unit (eg cultural background, special needs, employment/unemployment etc);

2 The number (and age range) of children who attended mobile pre-school unit sessions and, the number of children on waiting lists;

3 The nature of the programme which was provided by the mobile unit (eg length of sessions, frequency of sessions in each area visited, types of activities set up for the children, main goals of programme, the nature of interactions between teachers and children, the nature and extent of parental involvement during kindergarten sessions, and so on);

4 The nature and extent of mobile pre-school unit teachers' interactions with parents;

5 The general running and organisation of the mobile unit eg distance travelled to each group's location, travel time, use of the mobile unit's vehicle, and the way in which the itinerary was decided;

6 The extent to which there was liaison between staff from the mobile pre-school unit and other early childhood education workers/groups in the areas which the mobile unit served;

7 The way in which teachers saw their role as mobile unit teachers, their opinions on the advantages and disadvantages of their work, and what they considered the major present and future early childhood education needs were for children and parents in the communities that they served.

Further goals of the study were:

8 To obtain information from parents on:

(a) how satisfied they were with the programme that the mobile pre-school unit provided for their children;

(b) the extent to which they (the parents) were involved during sessions held by their local mobile unit;

(c) whether or not their children also took part in other early childhood education programmes; and,

(d) the benefits for them personally of being associated with a mobile pre-school unit.

9 To obtain information from the parent committees (ie the elected representatives of groups) associated with each mobile pre-school unit on:

(a) how satisfied they were with the programme that the mobile unit provided for children in their area;

(b) how satisfied they were with the availability of teachers to talk to parents about their children and other matters and to help parents acquire the skills necessary to run sessions on the days that the mobile pre-school unit did not visit their group;

(c) the extent to which the committee and/or parents became involved in the running and organisation of the mobile unit's programme for their area;

(d) the nature, and frequency of any sessions run by parents on the days that the mobile unit did not visit their group;

(e) the extent to which children who attended the mobile unit also participated in other early childhood education programmes;

(f) the committee's views of the major present and likely future early childhood education needs in their particular area; and,

(g) the advantages for parents themselves of being associated with the mobile unit.

10 To obtain information from early childhood education organisations/individuals (ie kindergarten associations, senior teachers, district officers with responsibility for early childhood education, mobile units' management committees) and the YWCA on:

(a) the role of the mobile pre-school unit in the area which they (the organisation or individual) were in and/or oversaw;

(b) the extent to which they (or their organisations) were involved in the running of the mobile unit;

(c) the extent to which mobile unit teachers liaised with other early childhood education workers in their areas;

(d) their opinions about the major present and future early childhood education needs of the community/communities which the mobile unit served; and

(e) their opinions about the strengths and weaknesses of mobile pre-school units in general and the mobile pre-school unit with which they had specific contact, in particular.

These objectives were intended to ensure that information was obtained which would give an insight into individual mobile pre-school units while also providing data which would give some measure of the effectiveness of mobile pre-school units generally and show what their role is, or may be, within the broader framework of early childhood education in New Zealand.

Methodology

As can be seen from the research objectives we, as researchers, sought information about the mobile pre-school units from the perspective of the mobile pre-school unit teachers (the professional view), individual parents and parent groups (the consumer view), and bodies such as the local kindergarten associations/YWCA, District Officers - Early Childhood Education, senior teachers, and the mobile units' management/liaison committees (the 'administrative' view). In addition, teachers, children and parents were observed at work and play during normal session times at each unit over a five day period (or, in the case of one unit, a nine day period). More detailed information on the methodology used is given after the section on sampling.

The Sample

Because the mobile pre-school units were scattered throughout the country and served communities which differed considerably from one another, a 'case study' approach, which meant visiting all nine units in turn, was considered more appropriate than choosing to observe just some of the units.

A full working week was spent at each of eight mobile pre-school units, and almost two weeks[8] in the case of the YWCA unit, observing teachers, parents, and children at work and play. All 18 teachers (two at each mobile unit) were also interviewed during the observation period.

Parents of children attending mobile pre-school units were surveyed by means of questionnaires. Where possible, parents were handed questionnaires personally during the observation weeks, or if they were not present at a session, questionnaires were left for the teachers or other parents to hand on to them. While it was not possible to obtain precise numbers of parents prior to visiting the mobile units, attempts were made to include all eligible parents in the survey (teachers and/or members of parent committees advised on the numbers of families enrolled or associated with their different groups so that the appropriate number of questionnaires could be distributed). Response rates for parents, by mobile unit, are reported in Chapter 5.

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[8] A longer period was spent observing at the YWCA mobile unit because the itinerary for this unit was based on a two week period rather than just one week.

The YWCA and all seven kindergarten associations[9] with responsibility for mobile pre-school units were also surveyed by means of postal questionnaires, as were six District Officers - Early Childhood Education, seven senior teachers, and each of the mobile units' management (9) and parent committees (52).

Research Instruments and Procedures

To achieve the objectives set out in the previous pages, a variety of data collection procedures were used. These are detailed below[10].

1 All teachers working on the mobile pre-school units were observed during each of the eight teaching (child-contact) sessions throughout the week of our visit using an adaptation of Smith et al's (1986) teacher observation instrument and Meade's (1985) modification of the Honig and Lally (1975) observation schedule (Table 2.1). (The modified version of these scales was also used in Smith, McMillan, Ratcliff, and Kennedy's (1988) study, Three's Company? - An Evaluation of the Effect of a Third Teacher in Selected Kindergartens.) Teacher behaviours were systematically observed by means of the interval recording procedure - whereby the researcher observed for 10 seconds and recorded, by using the appropriate code for each behaviour, what was seen for 5 seconds. (The 24 types of teacher behaviours were all precoded and a specially designed form was used to facilitate the recording process.) (Two different toned 'beeps', transmitted by means of a small battery operated device linked to an earpiece worn by the researcher, signalled when to observe and when to record.)

As shown in Table 2.1, the precoded categories of behaviours used when observing teachers were separated into several broad groupings: interactions between a teacher and one or more children (nine different sub-categories); interactions between a teacher and parents and/or other visiting adults (seven sub-categories); and, interactions (verbal exchanges) between teachers. The major activity in which the teacher was involved when specific behaviours were occurring was also recorded (eg whether the teacher was facilitating play with a small group of children, leading a large group activity, 'caregiving' the child, talking exclusively to parents, and so on). The target time for observation was 40 minutes per teacher, per session, but this turned out to be not always possible due to variation in the length of sessions or a variety of interruptions during the observation periods. The length of time that teachers at each unit were observed is detailed in Chapter 4, along with discussion of data resulting from the observations.

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[9] Seven, rather than nine kindergarten associations (and senior teachers) were surveyed because some of the mobile units came under the jurisdiction of the same kindergarten association/senior teacher (ie the Clevedon and Franklin units, and the Thames and Lakeland units). There were also only six rather than nine District Officers - Early Childhood Education surveyed. One such officer was responsible for overseeing the Clevedon, Franklin and YWCA units while another oversaw the Thames and Lakeland mobile units. The kindergarten associations/district officers/senior teachers with responsibility for more than one mobile pre-school unit, however, were asked to complete separate questionnaires for each mobile unit (although certain more general items needed to be answered on only one of the questionnaires.)

[10] Members of the Advisory Committee for the study (whose names are listed in Appendix 1) offered valuable advice on the proposed format of the study, and had considerable input into the form of the various questionnaires which were used.

The purpose of the teacher observations was not intended in any way to assess or evaluate the particular teachers involved but rather was seen as a way of providing some objective data, gathered in a systematic way, on the nature of the environments provided by mobile pre-school units (at the time they were observed), environments in which teachers are clearly a major and significant component. In Smith et al's (1988) study referred to above, selected children were also observed in order to give a fuller description of the nature of the environment in the kindergartens being studied. Unfortunately, in this study, it was only possible to focus on teacher behaviours and not on specific children's behaviours as well during formal observation because, in order to see if there is any particular pattern of behaviour occurring for a given child it is necessary to observe that child a number of times. Repeated observations of the same child/children would seldom have been possible in this study given that mobile pre-school unit children cannot attend sessions every day (most can attend only once or twice a week) and given that the observation period at each mobile unit was limited to five days (or nine days in the case of the YWCA unit).

2 As well as the formal observations of teachers, the researchers also recorded other information about each of the mobile pre-school unit sessions which they attended, that is, the times sessions began and ended, how long it took to unpack the van and get the session underway, the number and approximate age range of the children present, the nature of the accommodation available to the various groups visited by the mobile units, the number of parents present for all or part of the session and the nature and extent of parental involvement, the structure of the programme, the types of equipment and activities available to the children, and general observations about special events or other occurrences which may have affected the particular session. Although the researchers used a prescribed form designed for the purpose (the 'Session Checklist')[11], on which to record this information, the data was obtained in a much more informal way than that for

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[11] Copies of the session checklist, and other instruments and questionnaires used in the study may be obtained on request from the Research and Statistics Section.

Table 2.1: The precoded categories of behaviours used when observing teachers

Behaviour	Code
Teacher-Child Interactions	
1 Verbal initiation	V ->
2 Verbal direction/command	D
3 Verbal response	V <-
4 Verbal conversation	C
5 Exposition	E
6 Non-verbal initiation	N ->
7 Non-verbal response	N <-
8 Socioemotional positive	S +
9 Socioemotional negative	S -
Teacher-Parent Interactions	
10 Greetings/Farewells	G or F
11 Information sharing	I
12 Casual conversation	Ca
13 Personal problems*	Pp
Teacher-Visitor Interactions*	
14 Greetings/Farewells*	VG or VF
15 Information sharing*	VI
16 Casual Conversation*	VCa
Teacher-Teacher Interaction	√
Major Activity which Teacher was Involved In	
1 Caregiving child	CC
2 Caregiving environment	CE
3 Facilitation of play	FP
4 Supervisory	S
5 Leading group activity	G
6 Talking to parents*	P
7 Talking to visitors*	V
8 Talking to the other teacher*	T

* Categories marked with an asterisk were added especially for the present study.

cont...

Table 2.1 continued

Definitions of Teacher Behaviour Codes

Teacher-Child Interactions

1 Teacher verbal initiation: teacher initiates a verbal interaction with a child: eg asks a question, tells a child something. The teacher makes the first move. Must be to an individual or small group (ie less than 5).
2 Teacher direction or command: teacher directs child or commands child to do or not to do something.
3 Teacher verbal response: teacher responds to an initiation from the child eg answers a question.
4 Conversation: a verbal exchange with a child which is part of a sustained conversation and where it is impossible to tell who initiated and who responded. [Length of conversations were also recorded].
5 Expository: teacher explains something, shows how something works, gives reasons for a command, gives information to child or small group.
6 Teacher non-verbal initiation: teacher initiates an interaction with the child non-verbally eg touches the child, gestures to the child, holds out material for the child to take, points to something. The teacher makes the first move.
7 Teacher non-verbal response: teacher responds non-verbally to an initiation from the child eg does something child has asked her to do, nods, points (in answer to request).
8 Socioemotional positive: an interaction suggesting shared positive affect towards child eg the teacher smiles or laughs at child, hugs child, holds child's hand, picks child up, comforts child.
9 Socioemotional negative: an interaction suggesting negative affect between teacher and child eg teacher frowns, shouts, reprimands, criticises, uses an angry voice, isolates child, ignores child when attention requested, restrains child physically, smacks child.

Teacher-Parent Interaction/Teacher-Visitor Interaction

Any verbal exchange between a staff member and a parent/visitor.

Codes are according to topics of conversation.

10 & 14 Greetings/farewells
11 & 15 Information sharing: includes exchange of information about aspects of the mobile unit (eg parent donations, how the unit is organised and run) and exchange of information and ideas about parenting, child development and so on.
12 & 16 Casual conversation: includes the previous category (trivial) to some extent, plus conversations about the weather, what people are wearing, what was on TV last night etc.
13 Personal problems: a parent sharing personal problems with a teacher (including problems with a child), a discussion which goes beyond an exchange of information.

Teacher-Teacher Interaction

Any verbal exchange between one staff member and another.

Activity which Teacher was Involved In for the Majority of Each Observation Interval

1 Caregiving child: eg putting an elastoplast on child, helping a child wash his/her hands, put on an apron, take off coat etc.
2 Caregiving environment: cleaning, tidying up, doing dishes, clerical or other administrative work.
3 Facilitation of play: eg physically sets up play activity, suggests children become involved in play activity, physical presence and/or involvement in play activity.
4 Supervisory: observing, directing children, moving between areas.
5 Leading a (large) group activity: eg reading story, directing finger plays, handing out paintings. [This category is used when all - or a large proportion - of the group of children is involved.]
6 Talking exclusively to a parent or parents for duration of the observed interval (10 seconds) and not simultaneously interacting with a child, supervising, caregiving environment etc.
7 Talking exclusively to a visitor/visitors.
8 Talking exclusively to the other teacher.

teacher behaviours. Mostly this was because the researchers just had to record as much as they could, when they could, in the relatively short time available to them after recording teacher behaviours, distributing parent questionnaires and answering queries from parents etc. (The information obtained by means of the session checklists forms the basis of the descriptive case studies contained in Volume II of this report.)

3 Prescribed interviews (developed by the researchers), and corresponding rating schedules (a series of items closely related to the sorts of questions teachers were asked in the interview, requiring respondents to rate aspects of their work on five-point rating scales) were used to determine the ways in which staff saw their role as mobile unit teachers, their opinions on such things as the advantages and disadvantages of their work; job satisfaction; their philosophy for working with children; their relationships with parents, and the role that they thought parents should play both inside and outside sessions; the organisation and running of the mobile unit; and, what they considered to be the major present and future early childhood education needs for children and parents in their area. Data from the interviews with teachers and from the rating schedules are presented in Chapter 3.

On forms designed for the purpose, teachers were also asked to provide (1) information on the number of families enrolled at their mobile pre-school unit, and the number and age range of the children who attended on a regular basis and, (2) the kilometres travelled each week in the course of their work, together with the total time spent travelling to and from groups.

Finally, teachers were requested to complete a 'Teacher Diary' at the end of every session for a period of one week. The 'diaries' were to be completed as soon as possible after the fieldwork period at each unit; most teachers completed their diaries in the week immediately following the researchers' visit. (The 'Teacher Diary', a modification of a similar instrument used in Smith et al's (1988) Three's Company? study required teachers to rate - and briefly comment on - aspects of specific sessions eg how successful they felt the session had been in terms of: time spent with the group as a whole, and with individual children; children being safe and happy; the programme being stimulating and encouraging children's learning and development; being able to make contact with parents; parents helping with housekeeping tasks and/or working with the children; and, their own job satisfaction. Teachers were also asked to record the number of enrolled and non-enrolled children present, the number of parents who remained, the main activities they were involved in during the session, the best and worst things about the session, and any special activities or occurrences which may have affected the session.

It had been found in Smith et al's (1988) study that teachers were able to complete the diaries quickly, without the task intruding too greatly on their own time, an important consideration.

The purpose of the diaries was to help provide further insight into the day-to-day running of mobile pre-school units: some of the information from the teacher diaries has been used in the individual case studies contained in Volume II of this report.

4 Questionnaires developed for parents (or other primary caregivers) of children who attended a mobile pre-school unit, and distributed during the weeks in which the fieldwork was carried out, asked the recipients to record their perceptions of the quality of the experience their children received at mobile pre-school unit sessions, the extent of their own involvement during sessions, their feelings about relationships with staff of the mobile units, the benefits for them personally of being associated with the pre-school, and what they liked best and least about their mobile unit. Respondents were also requested to give a few background details, such as their relationship to the child or children in their care who attended a mobile pre-school unit, the age and gender of such children, whether they had had any other children attend a mobile unit in the past, and their major reasons for using the service provided by the mobile pre-school unit.

Respondents were requested to return their completed questionnaires to the Research and Statistics Division in the stamped, addressed envelopes provided, although a few chose to return their questionnaire to the researchers in person during the observation periods.

The questionnaire for parents was kept brief in the hope of making it as uncomplicated as possible and therefore suitable for a diverse group of parents.

The specific questions included in the parent questionnaire are detailed in Chapter 5, along with the discussion of parents' responses.

5 Because of the desirability of keeping the questionnaire for individual parents as straightforward as possible it was felt that data from that questionnaire alone would not yield a sufficiently comprehensive consumer (or parental) perspective of mobile pre-school units. For this reason, an additional - and more extensive -

questionnaire for parent committees (ie the elected representatives of each of the groups visited by mobile pre-school units with some responsibility for the running and organisation of their particular group) was developed. The questionnaire contained some items similar to those in the questionnaire for individual parents but also asked for the committees' views on: the accommodation/facilities available for the group to meet in; the quality of the play equipment and other materials provided; the major strengths and weaknesses of their mobile pre-school unit and whether any changes were necessary; the role of the committee in several aspects of the running and organisation of the mobile unit; the opportunity for parents to become involved; the role that parents should play both inside and outside session times; and, the pre-school education needs, as they saw them, of their communities.

It was expected that the increased difficulty of the questionnaire would not be a problem given that a group of parents were given the opportunity to discuss the questions together and to make a joint response if desired.

6 A further questionnaire intended for early childhood education groups/individuals was also developed. The purpose of this questionnaire was to obtain an 'administrative perspective' (to complement the perspective of teachers and parents) on the mobile pre-school units from a variety of viewpoints. The basic questionnaire was modified slightly, as required, to suit each of the following: the mobile units' local kindergarten associations (and, in the case of the YWCA unit, the national office of the Young Women's Christian Association), the senior teachers, the mobile units' management committees (including the liaison group for the YWCA unit), and the District Officers- Early Childhood Education.

The content of the questionnaires included, for example, questions which sought information from respondents on: the role or function of the particular mobile pre-school unit(s) in their area in relation to the children, parents, and the community as a whole; characteristics of the communities served by the unit which affected the programme that was run; their role in the running and organisation of the mobile pre-school unit and their satisfaction with that role; their perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of their particular mobile unit(s) and of mobile units in general; any changes they would like to see made to the units; the nature and extent of their contact with the mobile pre-school unit teachers; and, the early childhood education needs, as they saw them, of the communities being served.

With the exception of the questionnaires for management committees, which were delivered by hand during the fieldwork period, the questionnaires for the other recipients were mailed, together with a stamped, addressed envelope for their return.

Data from these questionnaires are discussed in Chapter 6.

Data Collection

During the observation period at each of the nine mobile pre-school units, data was collected by either one or two researchers. After advising the relevant kindergarten associations, the Kindergarten Teachers Association, the YWCA, the District Officers - Early Childhood Education, and the mobile pre-school unit teachers themselves of the proposed research and receiving permission to conduct the study, arrangements were made to visit each unit at a time convenient to the teachers. Two researchers (who divided their responsibilities in the manner described below) visited the YWCA, Clevedon, Franklin, and Hunterville units together (although only one researcher was able to remain for the entire nine days spent with the YWCA unit) while the third researcher visited the Thames, Lakeland, Marlborough, Waimate and Southland units alone. The researchers working together followed the mobile unit van from group to group in a rental car while the other researcher was able to travel in the van with the teachers.

Teacher Observations

The teacher observations were carried out by two of the researchers, both of whom had received extensive training on the use of the observation instrument when working together on a previous study in kindergartens. They were therefore familiar with its use. The observers did not work together when in the field: one observed and recorded teacher behaviours at five of the mobile pre-school units while the other did the same at the four remaining units.

Reliability

Reliability checks on observations were carried out on two occasions prior to visiting the mobile pre-school units (a total of 80 minutes observation time with two teachers) in a standard, Wellington-based kindergarten (the teachers there were accustomed to being observed in the manner used in this study). The two researchers were connected to the same signalling device and simultaneously but independently coded behaviours exhibited by the same teacher. Inter-observer agreement was calculated by adding the number of agreements, dividing by the number of agreements plus disagreements and multiplying by

100. The inter-observer agreement for teacher behaviour on the two occasions was 87% and 91%, with a mean of 89%.[12]

Teacher Interviews

Interviews with teachers were mostly conducted by the same two researchers who were again familiar with the interview procedure from work on a previous study; due to time constraints, however, the third researcher also conducted a number of interviews. She observed at the initial one or two interviews carried out by one of the other researchers (with the permission of the teachers involved) in order to ensure that subsequent interviews were conducted in a similar way.

Other Observational Data

At three of the mobile pre-school units one of the researchers, as well as talking to parents, distributing questionnaires, and taking photographs, was solely responsible for recording all information required by the 'Session Checklists' (this was also the case for the first two days spent at the YWCA unit), while the other spent her time carrying out the teacher observations. At the remaining mobile pre-school units (including 7 of the 9 days spent at the YWCA), the teacher observations and session checklists were completed by one person.

Questionnaires

Questionnaires to parents, parent groups, and administrative organisations and individuals were distributed and collected as already indicated in the sections devoted to each of these questionnaires above.

Data Analysis

Qualitative content analysis of the interview data and the data from open-ended items contained in the questionnaires was carried out to determine some of the issues which exist in connection with mobile pre-school units from the point of view of teachers, parents and others.

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[12] Smith (1988) stated that: "It is generally acceptable for reliability to be over 70 per cent, but preferably it should be 85 per cent or more." (p 55)

Basic statistical analyses have been carried out on the teacher observation data (Chapter 4) and on the data obtained from the Likert rating scale items in each of the questionnaires used.

Organisation of the Report : Volumes I and II

This report has been divided into two volumes: the first contains more 'formal' data on the mobile pre-school units, while the second contains a series of (illustrated) case studies, one for each mobile pre-school unit in New Zealand.

The chapters contained in the present volume (Volume I) discuss, in turn, data on mobile pre-school units obtained by means of the teacher interviews, teacher observations, and the questionnaires for parents, parent committees and others. The final chapter (Chapter 7) presents a summary and analysis of the main findings and provides suggestions for how the report may be used.

The case studies, which make up Volume II, are almost wholly descriptive: each contains a brief historical background (based on information from the former Department of Education files), followed by an account of the mobile unit's most salient features, for example, the number of groups visited, the number of children, and parents, who attended on a regular basis, the nature of the communities being served, the philosophy of the unit with respect to children and parents, the distance travelled by the teachers each week and time spent in travelling, length of sessions (including the time taken to unpack and repack equipment at the beginning and end of each session), and so on. In addition, from information gathered during the observation periods, the case studies include a relatively detailed description of all sessions attended by the researchers (referring, for instance, to the range of equipment made available to the children and the sorts of activities which they took part in; the structure of the session - ie whether it was mainly free play or a combination of free play, small and large group work; and the nature and extent of parental involvement during the session etc). Finally, the case studies describe the accommodation/facilities available for each group visited by a mobile pre-school unit to meet in.

The purpose of the case studies, as they are presented in Volume II of this report, was to try and show not only the similarities but also the differences between the mobile pre-school units, differences which, although to some extent were obviously influenced by teacher characteristics (teaching style, personality etc), cannot entirely be explained in that way. Other important variables for explaining differences seemed to be the nature of the communities in which individual groups were based (ie their relative isolation, the socioeconomic and/or cultural mix of the population), the extent of community interest in and involvement with the mobile units, the nature and extent of parental involvement in the pre-school programme and in the running and organisation of the mobile unit, the nature of the accommodation available for groups to meet in, the frequency with which groups could be visited, the distance that teachers on each mobile unit had to travel in the course of a week, the amount of equipment that they had to transport, the number and age range of the children who attended groups and so on.

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CHAPTER THREE: MOBILE PRE-SCHOOL UNIT TEACHERS - THEIR WORK-RELATED VIEWS AND EXPERIENCES

Introduction

In order to gain an indepth understanding of any organisation, it is clearly vital to consider the work-related views, attitudes and experiences of the people employed within that organisation. For this reason, comprehensive interviews (as described in Chapter 2) were conducted with teachers at the time of our visit to each of the mobile pre-school units. During the interviews (which were tape-recorded with the teachers' permission and later transcribed) the 18 teachers involved were invited to comment on many aspects of their work as mobile pre-school unit teachers. Broadly speaking, the main topics for discussion were: what the teachers liked best/least about their work and their overall job satisfaction; the nature of working relationships between teachers on a mobile pre-school unit; philosophy for working with children (especially in the context of a mobile unit); working and communicating with parents, and views about the role that parents should play in a mobile pre-school unit; the practical aspects of running a mobile pre-school unit (eg maintenance and storage of the vehicle, administrative responsibilities, provision, storage and transportation of equipment, the nature of the facilities available in which to meet, how decisions were made about the most appropriate itineraries, and so on); their role as teachers in the community and the extent to which they liaised with other early childhood and community workers; their opinions on the present and future role of their mobile pre-school unit; and, finally, some background details[13] about themselves (age, years of kindergarten teaching experience, where and when training was completed, the nature of the induction process into their job as a mobile pre-school unit teacher, and the amount of contact they had with teachers from other mobile pre-school units).

As well as the interview per se, teachers were also requested to complete a series of rating scale items (whereby they recorded their opinions on a series of questions about aspects of their work by means of five-point scales - eg ranging from 'Very satisfied' to 'Not at all satisfied', from 'Very important' to 'Not at all important', and the like, with the mid-point of all scales being designated a 'neutral' response). The rating scale items corresponded closely to questions asked in the interview and were a way of gaining some numerical data to accompany the teachers' verbal responses.

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[13] Some of the background details on teachers, for example, age, years of teaching experience and type of training are contained in Appendix 2.

Additional insight into the work of mobile pre-school teachers was gained from informal conversations between teachers and researchers throughout the course of the fieldwork period at each unit, and from the formal observations which are discussed in Chapter 4.

In many of the sections which follow, extensive use has been made of quotations from the teacher interviews. This has been done because the teachers' own words seemed the most telling way of revealing just what the work of the different mobile pre-school teachers involved. As illustrated in the case studies contained in Volume II of this report, the various mobile units were often very individual in character, hence the nature of the on-the-job experience of teachers from different units was frequently quite diverse.

The chapter has been divided into five sections: Part I covers teachers attitudes/feelings about their work and relationships between staff; Parts II and III discuss teachers' views in relation to children and parents; while Part IV considers other aspects of the mobile units and the teachers' role within those units. Finally, a brief summary of results is contained in Part V.

PART I : TEACHERS' ATTITUDES/FEELINGS ABOUT THEIR WORK

A 'Typical Day or Week in the Life of a Mobile Pre-School Unit Teacher

At the beginning of the interview, each teacher was asked to describe what a 'typical day or week' was like for her on a mobile pre-school unit. The sorts of responses made are detailed in the individual case studies, contained in Volume II. What was very evident, however, from all of the teachers' replies, was that they were very busy, constantly on the move, and were constantly required to adapt to a wide range of working conditions and to several groups of children and parents, all of which had their own quite specific characteristics. A very common sentiment expressed by the mobile unit teachers whom we encountered was, as put by one: "You have just got to work with what you've got."

What Teachers Liked Best about their Work

Following the outline of what their work entailed, teachers were asked what they liked **best** about being a mobile pre-school unit teacher. Respondents typically mentioned liking being able to provide a service for children (and parents) who would not otherwise have access to pre-school education; the variety, excitement, and challenge of their work; the ability to get out and about and not be tied to the same venue throughout the week; frequently being able to work one-to-one with a child and/or with small groups of children, either because of small group size and/or because of the high ratio of adults to children at sessions (many parents remained throughout mobile unit sessions); and simply, the pleasure that they gained from working with the children and parents who attended mobile unit sessions. The teachers expressed their feelings about what they liked best about their work in the following ways:

> *"The thing I like the best is working with the women. The way I work with them is just being friendly and relaxed and responding to them as another woman, rather than as a teacher; that's probably the best thing I like. There is room for real friendships to develop, and in the 15 months that I have been working here, that's starting to happen, people are starting to see me as a person rather than a teacher - although that role is always there - and you can get very close to people and like them a lot within this job."* [YWCA MPSU]

> *"I like the fact that it's always on the go...I also like working with the parents, having to get on with them and being able to work and expand on their ideas...It is such an interesting job, it is so varied and there is so much to do you are always busy."* [YWCA MPSU]

> *"I like working with the small groups of children best. I also like the parent contact side. Going to different areas each day is stimulating too."* [Franklin MPSU]

> *"The challenges that you have to meet and win to run a good programme on the mobile. I really enjoy helping children and parents who have problems and seeing children progress from their first day on the mobile to when they start school."* [Franklin MPSU]

> *"When I was a teacher [ie rather than head teacher] I liked the fact that I could spend so much time with the children. With small groups of children you can have so much one-to-one with them, you can spend more time with them, give them more. They are all really pleased to see us. The kids are great, they're really nice kids and there's no aggression between the children. They are all really well-behaved for us and we get to know them quite well - it's just like a family really. Since I've been head teacher though I get less time with them. It's funny, because I used to think it would be great [to be head teacher] and I used to wonder why I got left with the kids so much. I didn't realise so much was involved."* [Clevedon MPSU]

> *"The constant variety. You are not in one place with the same people everyday."* [Thames MPSU]

> *"The flexibility and the potential that is there. Input can be from such different angles. The children love to come, and get involved in activities so quickly. I don't like routine - I*

like to be spontaneous and versatile which you have to be on the mobile." [Thames MPSU]

"I really like the smaller groups of children. You can get very close to the children. You can achieve a lot more with them. I think in a big kindergarten, sometimes you get the feeling that you're just minding the children because the numbers are so big. We don't have that feeling. It's a very family feeling with the parents coming in. You are part of their life and how they feel about their children and the problems they have - we sit and discuss it and sometimes you can even discuss it in a group, with parents all sort of contributing to what they think are the answers to the problem. But I really like the small numbers." [Lakeland MPSU]

"The fact that everyday is different and I enjoy the travelling because of getting out and about rather than going to the same place every day. And the small groups of children. It's great! It scares me now to think of 40 children [in a standard kindergarten]. You've got much more of a supervisory role in those big kindergartens whereas we've got the time to spend with individual children." [Lakeland MPSU]

"I think the fact that you feel you are doing something rewarding, bringing pre-school to these country children, most of whom you know wouldn't otherwise have any chance of going to a kindergarten. It gives some of the parents a choice too, between playcentre and kindergarten which most rural families don't get. You also see the children from when they are born, basically, until they go to school - you just see so many more developments than you would in a normal kindergarten when you have only got them, say, from four to five years old, so that's something I really like." [Hunterville MPSU]

"I enjoy working with the small groups of children. I think you can achieve a lot more with small groups, even taking into account the varied age groups. We get to know the individual children possibly a little bit better than having large groups, so basically what I like best is working with the smaller groups of children." [Hunterville MPSU]

"The best thing is taking pre-school education to children who would otherwise get nothing and knowing that we are providing a service for them and their families." [Marlborough MPSU]

"Being out and about, the variety, the flexibility, the fact that you can make your own decisions within reason and extend whatever you want to do...In a normal kindergarten there are two teachers and 40 kids and you are at their beck and call all of the time and

you just don't have the time really to stop and actually talk to the children whereas you can do that on a mobile unit - you can really be involved with the children and the family because the family comes along too. Although it may only be once a week, if they start the children from babies - and lots of parents do come when their children are still very young just for companionship - and if you are on the van long enough and they keep coming until their children are five years of age by then you know the children and the families very well which I think is really important and something that is lost in a normal kindergarten. I think if you know the child's background and the environment that he or she lives in you can solve a lot of problems. I also like the fact that the parents don't feel threatened because they are coming into your kindergarten, [instead] they are coming into a place that is neutral and it is a very level meeting ground...There are actually lots of things I like about the mobile unit, apart from the freedom and the children. I suppose it is just such a different way of life - there are different stresses, but a lot of the stresses are only temporary at that particular venue and then you have a whole clean sweep in the fact that you travel to another group, so while you are travelling to another group you unwind from the previous one and get prepared for the next one. I like the idea that each group is different and you can approach it differently. It is not like if you have a terrible morning in a town kindergarten you have got to be there all day, it is not going to change. The children might change in the afternoon but the environment doesn't, whereas our environment changes. It is pleasant that, and [the other teacher] and I have time to unwind while we are driving along to the next place and you get a choice of restaurants at lunchtime if you want to eat out. Yes, and that is the other thing about not being in a town kindergarten, there is no telephone annoying you in a mobile kindergarten. You are not close to the telephone and nobody will distract you." [Marlborough MPSU]

"Going out into the country, I love it. The travelling doesn't bother me and driving is no problem so it's being able to bring these children together really, to give them the opportunity to meet up with other children of their own age that I most like. It's an advantage for the mothers as well which is good to see. Basically what I like is mixing with country mums and country children - they are delightful. Not everyone can cope with all the young ones, the babies that come along too but I enjoy them - I am a grandmother and I think that is why I relate to it better." [Waimate MPSU]

"I like best that I know the children like to come to mobile and I know that I am bringing it to the children who wouldn't otherwise have anything...I know that those children [who come to sessions] talk about it all the rest of the week at home and this is their day and I think that is the kick I get out of it, seeing their smiling little faces and being able to help these

> ***children - many don't see people outside their family for most of the week. It's lovely to see those children progress."*** [Waimate MPSU]

> ***"I like seeing the different children everyday - the variety in both places and faces. I like the shorter session times - although they are more intense [than at normal kindergartens] because you really have to be at your best for every group as they see us only once a week. The shorter sessions mean you are really busy the whole time - time almost drags when you go back to a town kindergarten, the children don't need you so much there. At mobile, the children burst to tell you news. It is never boring or dull - you never watch the clock and wait for the time to go home."*** [Southland MPSU]

> ***"The best thing is the children - I just love them."*** [Southland MPSU]

What Teachers Liked Least about their Work

In order to get as balanced a perspective as possible on teachers' attitudes to their work, individual teachers were also asked to comment on what they liked **least** about being a mobile pre-school unit teacher. Respondents frequently mentioned, as least liked aspects of their work, such things as: facilities which were cold in winter, crowded and noisy when a lot of children and adults were all present at once, inadequately fenced, and lacking in suitable outdoor equipment, as well as having a number of other drawbacks; not being able to display children's art work on the walls of venues because of meeting in borrowed accommodation; not being able to spend enough time with each group visited which made it difficult to complete everything they would have liked and to follow up on any children with problems; lack of support from their administrative bodies; the constant unloading and loading of the van and the setting up process at every venue; and, having to use equipment which was unsuitable for the mobile situation. The teachers described what they liked least about their work in the following ways:

> ***"The thing I dislike about it most is the fact that we don't get as much support as we should from the kindergarten association. Not having the support or backup from senior teachers which I had in my first job and which I found really great is also hard. The packing and unpacking I don't much like although its not that bad because there is usually someone there to help you and you work out a system to pack the car. I don't like having a car[14] instead of a van because it limits what you can carry. It also makes it more difficult to pack things properly and you can't have proper trollies or anything like that to put equipment in. The big boxes we have to use to put everything into get quite heavy."*** **[YWCA MPSU]**

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[14] The YWCA unit was the only one which used a stationwagon instead of a van.

"I find the travelling really tiring. Only going twice a week to each group makes it hard to get continuity with themes and activities, so that can be frustrating." [Franklin MPSU]

"The unloading and loading of the van. Some days you don't want to be energetic and you have to carry all that gear. I don't like the fact that we are not supplied with wet weather gear which we could keep in the van for when it really pours down and you are trying to unload the van. Not being able to display the children's work on the walls at Waiau Pa is something I really hate. " [Franklin MPSU]

"I used to like least the fact that there wasn't a telephone but now [that I'm head teacher and do a lot more parent work] I'm quite happy that there isn't a telephone. The thing I like least is unpacking the furniture at the Clevedon venue [where we stay all day] and packing it up again and the hassles it causes." [Clevedon MPSU]

"With the constant moving around you can leave equipment at one group and get to the next one and find it is not there and that just about wrecks everything you were trying to do. We usually check but every now and again you will leave something behind, which really mucks things up if you leave behind something you had planned for a special activity with the group that day. One thing on the mobile is that you have got to learn to adapt on your feet: if something is not there you have to think 'Well, what else can we use?' Parent contact can be difficult too which can make the job difficult. Parents can be very helpful and they can also be extremely critical. Because they are there all the time it makes you have to be aware of what you are doing because when a parent says 'Why are you doing that?', you have got to explain why and what the benefit is to the children. You become very adept at explaining what you are doing. Usually once we have explained what we are doing they usually realise they have no reason to have been critical in the first place but it does make things hard sometimes. We are trained but you sometimes forget that other people don't know the things we have learned and just take for granted." [Thames MPSU]

"That's hard to answer really but I feel the mobile is unprofessional in a lot of ways, a bit too disorganised at times. I feel a lot more could be happening within the programme - there should be a more developed programme for the children, working out which skills individual children need to work on." [Thames MPSU]

"The lifting of heavy equipment that's not really designed for mobiles. Sometimes there is not enough time to do all the things that we want to do, like the making of extra equipment." [Lakeland MPSU]

"[There's] nothing [I dislike] really except that just in the beginning it was getting used to all the parents being around, feeling that they were watching me when probably they weren't at all. It was just that they were there, right where you were working all the time but you realise that you have to just bowl on regardless. I wouldn't at all say that I don't like that now because I think it's great having parents come along." [Lakeland MPSU]

"Unloading and loading up the van. I don't really dislike the travel but it gets so tiring that you sometimes think, 'Oh - '. Setting up the venues is hard too - it would be nice just to have everything there each time instead of spending half an hour organising it all, lifting and carrying. Toilets at some venues leave a lot to be desired - these are all the physical things I don't like about the job. The other thing, I guess, is the frustrations caused by some of the parents sometimes. It's not that I don't like the parents being there, I have gotten used to that although I found it really hard when I first started this sort of work, getting used to being on show in front of parents, it's just the frustration of, say, parents not watching their two-and-a-half year olds and letting them run riot and disrupt the rest of the session. Sometimes the lack of consideration and cooperation that we get from the [kindergarten] association makes things difficult. Also, trying to do things like shopping for the kindergarten when we haven't got the time - like the town teachers can just go after work or in their lunch hour whereas we haven't got the time to do that, so we often don't get equipment that we would like to get because we have not got the time to go and look and choose it." [Hunterville MPSU]

"Not being able to be in contact with people during the day and having phone calls at night and in the weekends [about matters related to the mobile unit] - that really bugs me sometimes. I can see why the parents do ring then or why I do have to conduct a lot of business from home after hours because I can't be contacted during the day but sometimes it just really annoys me." [Hunterville MPSU]

"Some of the venues are cold in the winter which makes things uncomfortable. Also the fact that there is not enough time - all but one group meet only once a week and you don't get the time to lead on if you are doing a particular theme, and although you can try and extend the theme through the children's workbooks - they all have workbooks - it is not always the same and different parents have different interpretations as to what you are actually meaning for the extension on any activity. Those things are quite inconvenient

sometimes. Sometimes the little ones [pre-enrolled children] can be a little bit of a problem too because they might destroy the bigger children's work. It is not a big problem but it's there. It is one of the things that can sometimes get you down a bit. There are not an awful lot of things I don't like about the mobile: one of the things, though, is not being able to carry everything with you - you can only take a certain amount of equipment each time and so if you see the opportunity for looking at insects because somebody has brought one along and you haven't got the magnifying glasses and you haven't got the reference books to find out anything more about it, I find that difficult. Also, I like to have the children sing - there are lots of songs about the things that we do and in a town kindergarten you could go to the bookshelf and get the book that has got that particular song or poem in it about hammering or windy days or leaves or something - but it is just not possible to bring everything so those are the things that I like least about it: not enough time, not being able to give the children enough extension work, and the fact that you can't carry everything you might need with you. One other thing I don't like is that at some of the venues you can't display the children's art work - that is really a problem because it means that the venues can't even look as if they are child orientated." [Marlborough MPSU]

"Not being able to be fully responsible for our venues - having to take whatever is available in the community. I think that is the thing that I like least because you can't capitalise on cupboard space etc, and you might only have one room as we have at Havelock - things can get very hectic, especially in winter when we can't get outside." [Marlborough MPSU]

"I think too many mothers around is what I like least. Don't think I am downing the mothers, I am not. They are so happy, so pleased to see each other that they forget we are around sometimes and what I like least is that chatting in the background when I am trying to take music or trying to take a story." [Waimate MPSU]

"I can't stand parents talking in the background. It makes it very frustrating. They thoughtlessly laugh at times at the children's antics and that puts some of them off. Sometimes when you are going through a stage with the little babies and you get a wet day and you have got prams and everything in a very small area that gets a bit frustrating too, trying to move around and cope with situations. It can be bedlam, and parents sort of get in little huddles chatting and they don't see that you are trying to get around them to do things and get to the children. They are so engrossed in their affairs that they are oblivious to what is going on around them. The problem is worse in winter of course when everyone has to be inside." [Waimate MPSU]

> ***"The time allotted - we have to try and pack a whole week into two hours. There is so much to do - we have to try and squeeze in language development as well as everything else. Having to talk such a lot - you have to be at your best for each separate group because they see you only once a week and so it is very demanding. Not being able to say to the children we will do 'this' or 'that' tomorrow - instead it is a whole week before we see those particular children again."*** **[Southland MPSU]**

> ***"There is not really anything that I don't like about the mobile."*** **[Southland MPSU]**

Job Satisfaction

As a follow-up to the questions on best/least liked aspects of their work, teachers were asked to 'describe in your own words your feelings about your work and any particular problems or advantages that it has'. In their responses to this item, the teachers to a large extent reiterated or elaborated on points they had already made in relation to the previous items on what they most and least liked about their work and indicated that while feelings of job satisfaction were generally high (as shown in Figure 3.1 on page 48), this feeling was often affected by the more frustrating aspects of their work, such as lack of time and the limitations that this placed on any programme that was developed. Teachers' general feelings about their work are readily apparent from the comments that they made:

> ***"I like the flexibility of the job. I like working with the women, the satisfaction of seeing them develop and change - I find that exciting...The other feeling that is important for me is that we are an option in terms of pre-schooling. I like this model very much - we are working not at the obvious level of pre-school intervention but working at something [ie with the women] that has much more long term effect. The mobile gives people more choices of pre-school. I believe that being given a choice, letting people decide, makes people feel better about themselves...One of the advantages of my work is that I've become more tolerant and less judgemental since I've been here, it has been great in terms of my personal development. I've learned when I relate to someone who is behaving in a really different way to look beyond that behaviour and look at what it's telling me...Problems for me on this job are mainly administration. I don't feel that there's a good support system set up. Also, I don't think there is a lot of understanding within the wider community of what the job is, and education of the community is left up to staff. For me, that's a problem because I already have enough things to do...There isn't enough time as it is, because of the number of people that we deal with every week, to develop our programme into its full potential."*** **[YWCA MPSU]**

"Our support group, management group and management committee aren't supportive to us at all and they are so unhelpful that I don't even know who is on the management committee or the support committee because they haven't met since I have been on the unit which I think is disgusting. So I think that is the main disadvantage of our work, that we are not given enough support. Because we are the YWCA mobile pre-school unit no one wants to own us. The kindergarten association think we are run by the YWCA but the YWCA have got their own problems and they haven't really got a lot of time to fit us in." [YWCA MPSU]

"The small groups of children to work with is a huge advantage. The main problem for me is learning as a new head teacher to juggle parent work and work with the children adequately." [Clevedon MPSU]

"I really enjoy working with a wide age range of children, to be able to learn about younger children which we didn't cover during training - I even went to playcentre courses to learn more about toddlers, babies. The chance to see children develop from when they come as babies to when they go to school is definitely an advantage of the job for me... A disadvantage is dealing with some parents who are critical - the parents who expect that anything that is 'wrong' with their child will be miraculously cured by coming to the mobile unit and if it's not then it must be your fault. But although some parents are difficult, others do learn from coming along - such as learning other ways to relate to their child other than smacking them. " [Thames MPSU]

"The advantages are the flexibility of the job which is good for a young teacher wanting to tune in to lots of different things, the variety of venues, and the different groups of children. The disadvantage for me at the moment is having a lot of parents around - I don't feel confident in front of them; also dealing with some of their problems is a problem. It's a huge disadvantage when there are a lot of parents all inside as well as children because it gets so crowded and noisy. Also, the lots of little ones around is a problem because they can disrupt activities. I'm not used to them; also, I prefer to work with three to five year olds that I'm trained to work with." [Thames MPSU]

"The working with smaller groups of children is the real advantage. The variety - every day it's something different, you're going somewhere different, you don't know what's going to happen at each location. There's no boredom, there's no time to think 'Oh gosh, we've got to go to the same place and see those same faces five days a week.' That, I think, is the main feeling I have about my job." [Lakeland MPSU]

"Just that it's relaxed and that it has small groups of children. And that I now enjoy the contact with parents - I enjoy seeing them just about as much as the children. And they're pleased to see you, especially [the more isolated ones] who don't really see any one all week...I don't mind carting all the equipment around - it's just life. It's part of the job and its got to be done and you just get used to that. Sometimes things feel a bit heavier than at other times if you are tired or whatever, but no, it's just life. I'd rather do that than go back to a conventional town kindergarten." [Lakeland MPSU]

"I really enjoy the job and it's got very high job satisfaction but it also has lots of frustrations in that often things don't go according to plan. You might get to a venue and hardly anybody might turn up that day so whatever you have planned doesn't work out, or else the opposite might happen - you might have so many children arrive and they are just so busy doing all the normal things that you haven't got time to do the special thing you planned to do on that particular day, so then you get behind in your programme... I think it's a lot harder job than in a standard kindergarten because you have got such a wide variety of ages of children and all the parents there as well, but any time I have spent in a standard kindergarten now I feel quite bored because all the children are four and they all know what they are doing. That's a real generalisation, I know - it's not really like that but you sort of feel you don't have to put the same amount of time into the job in a standard kindergarten. You are battling all the time in this job because no sooner have you got one child up to a certain level there is another one coming on - you don't usually have more than one child at the same level at the same time. You've got all these different levels to contend with so you would have to decide in a session, 'Well, which one am I going to spend the time with today?' Like, this morning, was it more important to give Scott that extra encouragement with his truck, or should I have been helping George to use his imagination instead of him copying what Scott was doing, but George probably felt good about doing what he was doing so I just decided to let him go. And then there's ones like Shane who won't do anything so you have got that challenge for the next few weeks or months to get him to partake in activities and do different things so that when he goes to school he will be ready to go to school." [Hunterville MPSU]

"The advantages are knowing that you are going to areas where most of the children would otherwise have absolutely no pre-school education except for maybe a playgroup run by parents and even they [the playgroups] usually die in the end. There were problems when I took over the unit as head teacher - it had been run for about 18 months by an untrained head teacher who was a primary teacher and the other teacher on the van was in her first year out of training college. In the time they were on the van lots of

professional back up had been let go, as in speech therapy for the kids, Psych. Services, and that sort of thing and I found it incredibly hard trying to get recognition from a lot of these people again. They sort of see us as trotting around the back blocks once a week being nice to all the little children and all the little parents - they don't take us seriously from what I can make out. But I see our job to be incredibly important and I actually feel a lot of it is more important than what town children maybe get five days a week at kindergarten.

My feelings about my work are that I really enjoy it although I get really frustrated at times, trying to coordinate eight groups, only seeing the children once, some of them twice a week. I also get really really tired and, in fact, if I wasn't in cheap education board accommodation I would probably be looking to resigning because a certain amount of this is stress and you sort of get no compensation or whatever for doing the job which I actually think is much, much harder than in a standard kindergarten. I really love it, but it's just really hard going. Like, the Christmas holidays, it took me about three weeks to unwind before I could sort of go and face people socially and that sort of thing and that was basically tiredness, it was exhaustion." [Hunterville MPSU]

"I really enjoy the mobile unit, I really think that it is 'me'. I can imagine that it wouldn't suit everybody but I really do enjoy it - even with all of the disadvantages - and I look forward to going to work everyday. It epitomises for me the idea of kindergarten, smaller groups, parent involvement, lots of learning and input. All of those are advantages. I think the main problem is not enough time, as I've said before. One of the problems is that we don't really have the parent education time that I would like and I don't really know how to get around that, apart from using people like the public health nurses who have actually come forward [of their own accord] to help out with things like that. They have people in some areas who establish [courses] but it is very minimal - I think that they might run a course every term maybe...In town you have always got your neighbours to call in - well lots of the people in country areas don't have that and we might be their only professional [contact] that they will come and ask questions of, that they will feel confident enough to come and ask you [but the problem is] you don't really have enough time. We try to do it by example [ie demonstrate positive ways of interacting with children] but that is quite a task. I would like to be able to somehow set up more parent education. I think that is really really important, especially for those mothers who have to travel such a long way [and who] probably struggle on their own. But, no, I really like the work." [Marlborough MPSU]

"It has the advantage of the scenic side to it, travelling around every day, that is definitely a plus. You have to work as a team so that is an advantage too because it has to work well. You can't sort of hide from each other in a different part of the building as

you might in a town situation because you are sort of thrown together. I think it is also an advantage having mixed age grouping - you get to know more about a range of children...I like the idea of the parents around nearly all or most of the time, and being accepted into their communities is another advantage. Problems? Well, the biggest problem is that it can be frustrating not being able to provide the things that you would like to in your programme because your venue is shared by several other community groups and therefore you can't have anything ongoing or, in some places, you can't even leave anything out, everything has to be put away and no art work can be put up. I find that very frustrating. Occasionally there's a problem because you are trying to cover a lot of area in a short time and although the first priority is for the children there are times when I have gone away thinking that we could be doing more for that particular mum or dad. It's the problem of not having enough time...A definite problem is not having any support of any of the other mobile teachers because we don't ever see them or know who they are - which is something we would like to see changed." [Marlborough MPSU]

"I love travelling about the country side, the scenery, the changing seasons. Also meeting lots of people, and learning about the different communities." [Waimate MPSU]

"The advantages are the variety, it's always enjoyable, never dull." [Waimate MPSU]

"A frustration is no one really knowing about the job but the teachers themselves - with the constant change in management committee members, changes in kindergarten association staff, senior teachers and so on makes continuity and longer term planning difficult at times. Also, with changes in teachers too - so that new teachers have to be trained. There is not enough support, no set rules for mobiles so often have to make your own rules. Sometimes you have to bend the rules too - turn a blind eye to the fact that some children attend more than one pre-school at the same time - they need to because country children are penalised in the amount of time they get at pre-school, although different ways of doing things at different pre-schools (playcentre, mobile etc) can confuse the children. Mobile teachers have to go for quality rather than quantity - you have to be in top gear at every session, and can never put things off until the next day. You have to talk all the time and try to draw the children out and get them stimulated. That's why I yawn so much at the end of each day! It is hard having to educate parents year after year about your philosophy for working with children. I would like to see more cooperation between the different groups on the mobile but parents from each group don't even seem aware that the other groups exist a lot of the time. The big advantage of the job is that the children are always receptive, always keen to get to work - they don't play up they're so keen to do everything." [Southland MPSU]

***"I'm glad to get up and go in the morning. It's very satisfying work. No problems. The advantages are that you get to work with children and a 'nice lady' [ie the other teacher]!"* [Southland MPSU]**

How Teachers Typically Felt about their Work

As a further way of assessing teachers' attitudes to their work, and their sense of overall job satisfaction, teachers were asked to record on a series of semantic differential[15] scales, 'typical feelings about their work'. The teachers' responses are shown in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1: Teachers' typical feelings about their work

Ratings (Semantic Differential)											
	1		2		3		4		5		
Work is...	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	Work is...
...exciting	6	33.3	10	55.6	2	11.1	-	-	-	-	...boring
...exhausting	4	22.2	9	50.0	4	22.2	1	56	-	-	...relaxing
...satisfying	8	44.4	4	22.2	5	27.8	1	56	-	-	...frustrating
...unpleasant	-	-	2	11.1	1	5.6	4	22.2	-	-	...pleasant
...well-planned	5	27.8	8	44.4	4	22.2	-	-	1	5.6	...haphazard
...not flexible	-	-	1	5.6	1	5.6	3	16.7	13	72.2	...flexible
...well supported by parents	10	55.6	4	22.2	4	22.2	-	-	-	-	...unsupported by parents
...well supported professionally	4	22.2	3	16.7	7	38.9	4	22.2	-	-	...unsupported professionally
...not enjoyable	-	-	-	-	-	-	5	27.8	13	72.2	...enjoyable

As can be seen from the table, although most teachers (13) found their work to be much more 'exhausting' than 'relaxing' they also found their work to be generally enjoyable, exciting and satisfying.

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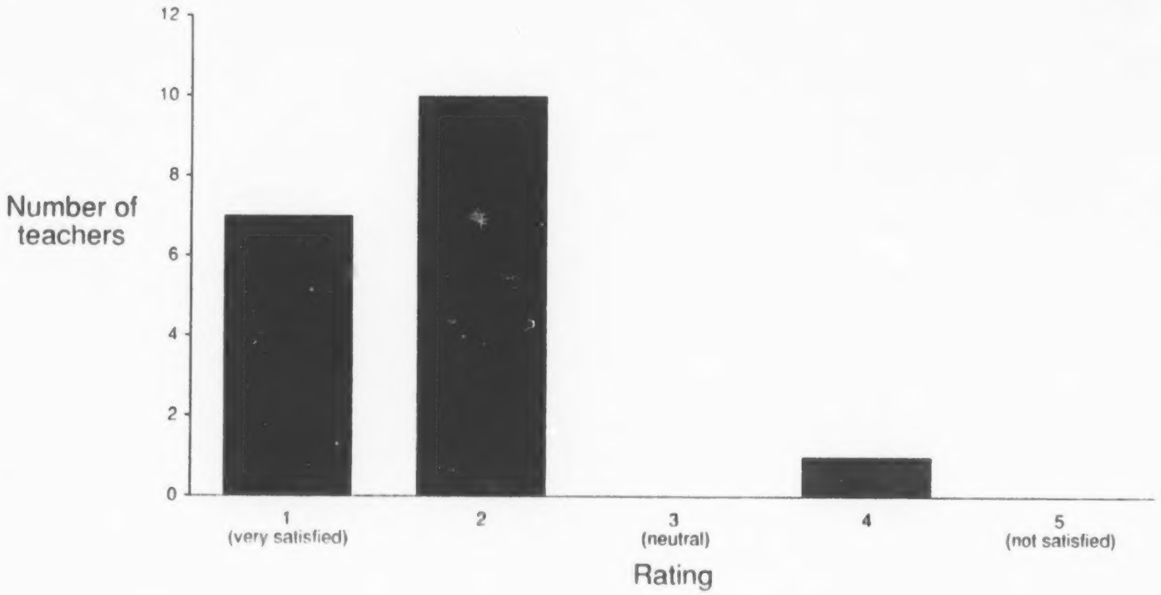
[15] Semantic differential scales are a method of measuring attitudes developed by Osgood, Suci and Tannenbaum (1957). Ary et al (1979) stated that "the semantic differential is based on the view point that objects have two different types of meaning for individuals, *denotative* and *connotative*, which can be rated independently...It is possible and useful to measure the connotative meaning of objects indirectly by using a number of bipolar adjectives and asking individuals to rate the objects against these adjectives. Thus the meaning of an object for an individual would be the pattern of his or her ratings of that object on the bipolar adjectives used." (p.190)

Finally, it was found that on a five-point scale ranging from '1 = Very satisfied' to '5 = Not at all satisfied' and the mid-point designated a 'neutral' response, that 17 of the 18 teachers rated their overall job satisfaction as either '1' or '2' (Figure 3.1). The remaining teacher (a young teacher, relatively new to her job on the mobile unit and with a different way of working from the other teacher who had been on the mobile unit for a much longer period) gave a rating of '4', mainly because she felt "...a lot more could be happening with our programme for the children."

Figure 3.1: Teachers' ratings of overall job satisfaction



Staff Relationships on a Mobile Pre-School Unit

As positive relationships between staff are a major element in the smooth running of any organisation, we thought it important to gain an understanding of the nature of the working relationship between staff on a mobile pre-school unit. The teachers whom we interviewed were therefore asked whether they thought that 'the mobile nature of the unit [had] an effect on staff relationships' and whether 'relationships between staff on a mobile unit differ[ed] from those of staff in a 'conventional' kindergarten?'

All but one teacher thought that the mobile nature of the unit did have a significant effect on staff relationships. They mentioned the points discussed below when giving reasons for their answer.

Respondents stated that because groups did not meet every day, they as teachers, were very much the focus of attention at sessions, especially given that large numbers of parents were often present. They felt, therefore, that mobile pre-school unit teachers had to be seen to work as a team and not express opinions or behave in ways which could appear to contradict what the other teacher was doing. They believed it would be difficult all round, particularly under such close scrutiny, for teachers not to get on well. The quality of staff relationships was therefore deemed by the teachers interviewed to be a very important aspect of work on a mobile unit. The teachers felt, too, that having a good relationship with the other teacher was an important source of support for them in their work.

Small venues, and small groups, resulted in teachers frequently having to work closely together, with little chance to 'escape' one another as is often possible in larger, town kindergartens. (Some teachers also mentioned that as they lived in small communities they were likely to encounter each other outside of work time as well.) Also, spending considerable time travelling together on the van meant that they were in constant contact throughout the working day, including lunch-times, thus if they had any major differences of opinion they had to learn to resolve these in order to work together equably.

Most teachers, however, commented that the enforced time spent travelling together was a positive aspect of their work, as it gave them an opportunity to talk over mobile unit events and to discuss what they should do for particular children/parents, and so on. It also gave them a chance to get to know each other better as people - to discuss topics other than work.

Respondents felt that, in general, although the head teacher had certain specific responsibilities as far as administration work and so on, as teachers, they very much shared the job responsibilities at their respective units, working where they saw they were most needed. Most felt, therefore, that because of the mobile nature of their work and the necessity to be at all times flexible in their approach, there was less rigidity in how the head teacher/teacher roles were divided out than there perhaps was in a 'conventional' kindergarten.

Teachers concluded discussions of the nature of staff relationships on a mobile pre-school unit by stating that they thought it crucial that careful consideration be given to those appointed to a position as a mobile pre-school unit teacher - ie, so that appointees were people who: were well aware of the importance of getting on well with the other teacher (due to having to work and travel in close confines); understood what it would mean to work with many different groups (often quite diverse in character) of both children and parents; could adapt to a variety of working conditions; could deal with a wide age range of children within the same group; and, finally, realised that they would probably not always be able to carry through on a carefully developed programme (as they might have expected to do after leaving teachers college) because of lack of time and having to move onto another group.

PART II: TEACHERS AND CHILDREN

Teachers' Philosophy for Working with Children

Teachers were asked to outline the 'most important things [they] were trying to accomplish in [their] work with children', with particular reference to the groups of children they encountered on their particular mobile pre-school unit. Of special note was the emphasis that teachers put on social development, stressing that this was of major importance for rural or otherwise isolated children who had few chances to interact with their peers or with adults outside their immediate family. Other areas that teachers felt were important in their work with children included encouraging children to be independent, creative, and interested in exploring their environment, and giving them skills to help them make the transition to school as smoothly as possible. ('Preparing children for school' was more likely to mean, from the teachers' point of view, children being able to relate to an adult other than their parents, being able to wash their hands, go to the toilet unaided, and cope with their food and drinks containers, and so on, rather than more 'formal' learning). The development of quality language skills was also seen to be of major importance by a number of teachers, again, especially for children living in more isolated areas.

It was evident from many of the teachers' responses that they frequently took into account the nature of the communities that they served in their work with children, trying to adjust their programme to suit it to the needs of children from different groups.

Many of the points that teachers made in relation to their philosophy for working with children are illustrated below.

> *"For a lot of them I am trying to encourage a sense of independence. Because children come usually with their parents, they don't get that same break they get in an ordinary, town kindergarten, so for me, a lot of work is encouraging the children to do things without their mothers. I want them to learn to socialise effectively. I find it important to discourage parents from stepping in to resolve conflict with their children...That independence thing isn't just physical independence, it's knowing they are capable of deciding for themselves, giving them skills to choose...I try to discourage sessions where children do everything as of rote. The independence of knowing, recognising that they don't 'belong' to their parents and are not just an extension of their parents is important. And the opposite of that is getting the parents to recognise that their children have the right to not always coincide with their wishes...You have to try and change the parents' expectations, so that they understand that it really is reasonable for children not to want to do things at the same time as the parent wants them to do it."* [YWCA MPSU]

> *"In our case [ie at the YWCA mobile unit] it's more working with the parents to educate them on how to run a playgroup. We are trying to show them that children need the companionship of other children, and that it is important also for the parents to be friendly with and have contacts with other parents, to just have time out for themselves. So our philosophy is not really on the children, it's more on the parents - in particular, on the parents being able to run a playgroup which has a happy environment and, hopefully, an educational one as well. But, you know, I think everything to do with children is educational anyway."* [YWCA MPSU]

> *"Probably getting them ready for school, I suppose, teaching them to share and cooperate and to communicate with other children as well. I am really into communication. I also think it is good if they can get into some kind of routine before they actually hit school as it seems to start them off on a really good foot so when they get to school they'll just be able to carry on and know that certain disciplinary skills - like when they are told to sit on the mat or are asked to do something - they know that's what they have to obey. They have got to obey those certain rules throughout life really."* [Franklin MPSU]

> *"To me, communication is the most important, not just speech but body language and [children] being able to talk to adults and [other] children. I think the most important thing we can do is make them feel...safe and secure and happy because it's their first*

experience in an educational institution. It's really important that they feel it's their place. [Also] learning to look after each other and looking after themselves and taking responsibility for each other is important. It's more important for the mobile children because a lot of them are more isolated because they're coming from farming communities - a lot of them only see each other during our session times and that's their only experience with sharing and having to think about someone else - perhaps more so than town children." [Franklin MPSU]

"I would like to see them gaining confidence and social skills. All sorts of confidence, you know, confidence in broader areas such as physical confidence and being able to cope emotionally without their parents or somebody close being with them. Some parents come in and ask 'Will they know their numbers, and be able to write their name and count to twenty, and know all their colours and everything before they go to school?' But that doesn't matter to me, that's not what we're here for. They probably will know those things anyway by the time they go to school...but I like to see them go on to school, looking forward to school, confident that they'll be able to cope with it, without mum, without anybody. That they'll be able to do basic things by themselves - go to the toilet, undo their drink bottle, know to wash their hands before they eat and things like that." [Clevedon MPSU]

"Generally, make kindergarten a positive, exciting experience for children...Because sessions are infrequent, it is important that the things we do are effective. Give children a broad range of experiences, increase their confidence and independence, be their friends." [Clevedon MPSU]

"My priority is social skills - all the intellectual and emotional development and everything else sort of follows on after that - purely because we are dealing with country children who often do not see much of each other, even in this day and age when people are more mobile." [Thames MPSU]

"I try to set up a learning environment so the children can come to their full potential. An environment that it not threatening. You have to be aware of the fact that children have different potential in different areas at different times. Social skill development is important but within certain guidelines - the children have to learn what they can and can't have or do. [Thames MPSU]

"Each group we go to is different - you can't compare groups because of their different social backgrounds. I place quite an important part on the social contact with children

because they only see other children once a week apart from their own family so I think learning to accept other people socially, getting on with them, being able to share and learn all those social behaviours is pretty important. And of course with our younger children, the fact that they're there just puddling around is important to them for their development. And our four-and-a-half year olds, I think at that stage they should be working towards cooperation and working on a lot of activities so I encourage them to cooperate together on shared activities." [Lakeland MPSU]

"Because all the groups are different you have to be aware of the different skills needed with each group. The Thursday groups, for example, we have to emphasise social skills most of all because they're very, very country children out there and they often won't see another child all week and so they come to kindergarten and would play with our stuff quite happily by themselves and without any interference from us if they wanted to. Whereas, if you compare that to the Nukuhau [town] group - they like to do things together, get us to read them stories, and produce paintings and other stuff by the millions. So I think it's just really being aware of what different children do need and applying it. And being aware of the different age groups too because they're all so different. That's what I found hard when I first started because you'd look at a child and you might think its three, three-and-a-half and find out it's only about two and you were wondering why it was not doing all the things you would expect. Basically, my philosophy is being aware of what different kids need and working from there." [Lakeland MPSU]

"Probably the most important thing is getting these children to develop their own imagination and independence...We don't think it is important that they should be able to print their name and do everything and that the end product should be perfect. We are more interested that they have tried and used their skills, used their imagination, and do what they want to do, instead of what their parents want them to do. Hopefully, by the time they've finished with us and they go to school they should be able to relate to their teacher. Whereas if they haven't learned that skill, when they get to primary school they won't probably have such a good chance of learning straight away because they will be too scared of the teacher. Not scared exactly but too shy, so it's really important for them to learn to be independent from their parents...The other really important thing with most of the children we see is for them to learn to play with their peers, to mix socially with children other than their brothers and sisters because often you find with our groups that there are all these children there but none of them playing together because they are not used to being with other children. They really enjoy coming to kindergarten and getting the activities, but they often aren't having any parallel play. That's why we like to try and encourage those sorts of things, and have different games and group stories and

quite a few group things, whereas probably in a standard kindergarten they wouldn't stop and make all the kids take part in a particular activity, so we do try to encourage them right from when they are little to socialise." [Hunterville MPSU]

"I try to develop independence in children and the ability to explore - if they can't investigate, explore in an atmosphere that is created especially for that then I don't see that they will ever learn that at school. To me, it is really really important that I provide an environment that is stimulating and interesting enough to encourage the children to actually explore how far they can go and where what they do is their own work. I really believe, especially on the mobile unit, that children be given the opportunity to explore. Lots of parents don't like children exploring but I believe that children learn if they are doing things themselves - they don't learn anything by being made to cut around a particular shape that a teacher or parent has given them but will learn about a shape by being able to draw their own. So that is my personal philosophy, in fact it is really important to me." [Marlborough MPSU]

"For me, language is the basis of my philosophy for working with children - developing the various ways that you can achieve optimum language skills. Parallel to that would be socialisation skills because I believe that a lot of the children on the mobile are isolated so that even merely having the opportunity to play with and be around other children is a big plus for them. But if they can't communicate effectively then you have a barrier so language and social skills go hand in hand really." [Marlborough MPSU]

"I try to develop children's social skills because these country children don't get much social contact with other children out on the farms. Often they don't get to play with children of their own age or even with children of the other sex if they are brought up in a family of all boys or all girls, so it is important that they get an opportunity to mix with other children. It's also good for them to learn to cope with smaller children too, to learn to be careful of the small ones. We are providing an opportunity for children to help themselves, to develop their own confidence, develop social, intellectual and motor skills but mixing with children of their own age group is really the most important thing." [Waimate MPSU]

"My philosophy for working with children is what I've put on the information sheet we give to all new parents: 'The programme is planned to provide a stimulating and happy environment for children to learn through 'free play' and to provide new experiences for preparation for life. Children are given maximum opportunity to explore and experiment with a wide range of equipment and activities to promote initiative [and] social interaction

> ***with peers and adults. Self-expression and growth are encouraged through art, music, movement, drama and language. Through free play, the child develops physically, mentally, emotionally and socially."*** **[Southland MPSU]**
>
> ***"I just try to talk to every child at each session."*** **[Southland MPSU]**

Goals for Working with Children

In addition to the interview question which invited teachers to describe their philosophy for working with children, teachers were also asked to rate how important they felt each in a series of goals (as stated in the schedule of rating scale items) for working with children was, and the extent to which they felt that each goal was achieved at their mobile unit. The results are shown in Table 3.2.

As would be expected from the sorts of comments that they made during their interviews, when rating the importance of the various goals listed in Table 3.2 the teachers placed high priority on: providing a 'good environment' for children to make friends in at mobile unit sessions (goal a); the development of social and language skills (goals f and g); encouraging children to be independent (q); and, 'children being happy and having lots of fun at sessions' (goal r).

Teachers also placed high priority on providing play opportunities to extend children's cognitive, physical and exploratory skills (goals b, c and e); drawing out quiet or withdrawn children (goal i); '...discouraging sex stereotyping' (goal l); and, giving children positive reinforcement for good behaviour (goal n).

It is interesting to note, in view of the low number of sessions that most groups were able to receive each week, and the teachers' comments on the difficulties that often resulted from this (see the section above on what teachers liked **least** about their work, and also their comments on the need for many parents to understand more about child development) that 'teachers providing "homework" for parents to do at home with their children between visits of the mobile unit' (goal p) did not appear to be an important consideration for many of the teachers. It was perhaps more a matter of teachers feeling that they did not have the necessary time to pursue this aspect of their work than that they did not think this would be a valuable thing to encourage - although as one teacher suggested, this was not always a straightforward matter as some parents tended to put pressure on their children to 'achieve' on any 'homework' tasks that might be assigned.

Table 3.2: Teachers' views of the importance of various (given) goals for working with children, and how often they felt the stated goals were achieved at their mobile unit (N)

Goal for working with children		Ratings							
		1 (Very important; almost always achieved) N	2 N	3 N	4 N	5 (Not at all important; rarely or never achieved) N		8 (missing data) N	9 (item designated 'not applicable' by the teachers N
a Children having a good environment to make friends is...	...very important	15	2	-	-	-	...not at all important	1	-
	...almost always achieved	10	5	2	-	-	...rarely or never achieved	1	-
b Children provided with play opportunities to extend their thinking is...	...very important	16	2	-	-	-	...not at all important	-	-
	...almost always achieved	4	10	3	1	-	...rarely or never achieved	-	-
c Children provided with lots of play opportunities to extend their physical skills is...	...very important	14	4	-	-	-	...not at all important	-	-
	...almost always achieved	2	7	7	2	-	...rarely or never achieved	-	-
d Children being prepared for school in terms of learning to sit still and pay attention is...	...very important	5	6	4	2	1	...not at all important	-	-
	...almost always achieved	4	8	3	1	1	...rarely or never achieved	1	-
e Children's curiosity being aroused and their learning extended by providing novel and interesting activities is...	...very important	15	2	1	-	-	...not at all important	-	-
	...almost always achieved	6	8	4	-	-	...rarely or never achieved	-	-
f Children learning social skills such as sharing and turntaking is...	...very important	15	3	-	-	-	...not at all important	-	-
	...almost always achieved	10	7	1	-	-	...rarely or never achieved	-	-
g Children's language development being encouraged through interaction with teachers is...	...very important	16	2	-	-	-	...not at all important	-	-
	...almost always achieved	4	10	3	1	-	...rarely or never achieved	-	-
h Children feeling secure in a caring atmosphere is...	...very important	17	-	1	-	-	...not at all important	-	-
	...almost always achieved	11	4	3	-	-	...rarely or never achieved	-	-
i Quiet or withdrawn children being given as much attention as talkative or disruptive children is...	...very important	18	-	-	-	-	...not at all important	-	-
	...almost always achieved	4	9	5	-	-	...rarely or never achieved	-	-
j Children being in a safe and healthy physical environment is...	...very important	15	2	1	-	-	...not at all important	-	-
	...almost always achieved	8	5	3	1	1	...rarely or never achieved	-	-
k Teachers understanding and responding to children from a variety of cultural groups is...	...very important	17	1	-	-	-	...not at all important	-	-
	...almost always achieved	5	7	3	1	-	...rarely or never achieved	-	2
l Teachers encouraging boys and girls to participate in all activities and discovering sex stereotyping is...	...very important	16	2	-	-	-	...not at all important	-	-
	...almost always achieved	8	8	2	-	-	...rarely or never achieved	-	-
m Teachers observing and recording individual children's progress is...	...very important	9	6	2	1	-	...not at all important	-	-
	...almost always achieved	2	7	3	3	2	...rarely or never achieved	-	1

cont...

Table 3.2 continued

Goal for working with children		Ratings 1 (Very important; almost always achieved) N	2 N	3 N	4 N	5 (Not at all important; rarely or never achieved) N		8 (missing data) N	9 (item designated 'not applicable' by the teachers N
n Teachers being able to provide positive discipline (ie, not just react to bad behaviour but draw attention to good) is...	...very important	17	1	-	-	-	...not at all important	-	-
	...almost always achieved	9	9	-	-	-	...rarely or never achieved	-	-
o Teachers regularly extending children's experience by taking them on visits outside the session environment is...	...very important	5	6	5	2	-	...not at all important	-	-
	...almost always achieved	2	7	3	5	1	...rarely or never achieved	-	-
p Teachers providing "homework" for parents to do at home with their children between visits of the mobile unit is...	very important	5	-	6	1	6	...not at all important	-	-
	...almost always achieved	5	1	5	1	6	...rarely or never achieved	-	-
q Children being actively encouraged to be independent is...	...very important	14	4	-	-	-	...not at all important	-	-
	...almost always achieved	8	5	4	1	-	...rarely or never achieved	-	-
r Children are being happy and having lots of fun at sessions is...	...very important	17	1	-	-	-	...not at all important	-	-
	...almost always achieved	12	6	-	-	-	...rarely or never achieved	-	-
s Teachers being able to give careful attention to new children and settle them in gradually is...	...very important	15	1	1	1	-	...not at all important	-	-
	...almost always achieved	9	2	5	2	-	...rarely or never achieved	-	-

Note: N = 18

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As can be seen in Table 3.2, the extent to which teachers felt they were able to achieve various goals for working with children was often at a considerably lower level than the degree of importance that they may have placed on the goal. There are obviously many reasons why any given goals are not always fully achieved, but the very fact that the units are mobile in nature goes a long way to explain why goals were not always reached. For example, time constraints due to the infrequency and often relatively short duration of sessions, made it difficult at times for teachers to complete all they had hoped to do at a given group before having to move on to the next venue and, because groups often did not meet again for some days, it was not a simple matter of being able to pick up on a theme again the next day, or take up where they had left off with a particular child. Other considerations in respect of whether teachers were able to meet goals which they felt were important included the characteristics of the venues that their different groups met in - for example, some venues were reported to have inadequate or non-existent outdoor facilities which made it difficult to achieve the goal of children extending their (large motor) physical skills; also, inadequate fencing, toilet facilities and so on at some sites at times made it a particular challenge for teachers to maintain a safe and healthy physical environment (goal j) for the children. One other major problem/frustration for teachers, in terms of providing a good range of 'novel and interesting activities' (goal e) was that they were always limited by what they were able to carry on the van with them and, as well, they had always to be aware of trying to cater for a very wide age range at many groups which meant that some children (especially those nearing school age) sometimes missed out as far as there being a sufficient supply of equipment suitable for their level of development and which could maintain motivation and interest. These are points that are reiterated by the teachers in their responses to the following items on how their work with children was affected by the mobile nature of the units, the extent to which they were able to develop programmes for children with particular needs, and the extent to which they were able to follow up on any programmes developed, given the infrequency with which they saw many of their children.

The Ways in which Teachers' Work with Children was Affected by the Mobile Nature of the Units

Once it had been established what their basic philosophy was for working with children, teachers were asked to comment on their experience of trying to put that philosophy into practice on a mobile pre-school unit. Specifically, teachers were asked: 'In general, how do you think your work with children is affected by the mobile nature of your unit ie in terms of maintaining a programme and achieving continuity with the children?' **and** "How do you feel about only being able to see children (and parents) once or twice a week?' The responses that were made are as follows.

"It takes a long time for the children to get to know you, and it's important for me or anyone as a teacher to remember what you did the last time you saw the children...It's hard, because of the fact that you do only see the children once a week (or fortnight)...We do run a programme, but it's very hard to stick to it...it's hard to do any theme work or anything like that with the children, unless the group is behind you and will support you, and you decide with the group coordinators that that's what you want to do and that's what they are prepared to go along and help you with. Then perhaps, if you can get that support they will carry it on, too, at the sessions when you are not visiting them." [YWCA MPSU]

"...it's quite difficult at times to plan activities that the younger ones won't find so difficult that they can't do it, and the older ones will be able to gain from it. So it gets quite tricky at times. Planning is a really big part of it. I think you have got to really consider the fact that you have got such a wide range of children." [Franklin MPSU]

"Only going twice a week to each place it's really hard to get a continuity going with games and activities. If you don't get something finished on, say, Tuesday, by the time Thursday comes they've forgotten what they were doing." [Franklin MPSU]

"The continuity thing is tough. It's hard. They've forgotten, even though we see them two or three times a week." [Clevedon MPSU]

"Well, we set a programme and if it breaks down we just forget about it and carry on with something else or whatever the children might want to do and pick it up perhaps the next time or the following week. If somebody comes with something that they feel is more important than what we want to do then we don't bother about what we had planned. But otherwise, we just do a programme for our 'kindergarten-aged' children - the little ones tend to just follow on and see what everybody else is doing." [Lakeland MPSU]

"We can't really have a theme except perhaps a very general one over a week. We might be able to really extend things with one group but keep it very basic with another, that sort of thing. The Nukuhau group we can sometimes have more of a go because we are seeing them three times a week so we can really push something if we've got something special we want to do. And different things work with different children too, I think. We can't expect something to work with one group that we've got to work with another group." [Lakeland MPSU]

"*Only seeing children once a week is really really frustrating because anything you have been discussing previously you have to generally remind them about before discussion can continue the next week...Only seeing them once a week, some children until they come really familiar with us, lapse into shyness when they see us again, especially newer children or some quite young children. So we have got to break down that barrier each week.*" [Hunterville MPSU]

"*I would prefer that we saw them more often. I sometimes wonder exactly how effective we are by coming once a week and whether any of the things that we actually do are carried on at home and extended. I find that quite frustrating, not knowing, because you can't measure it. I have only been on the van for a year, so although I have seen children getting a bit more mature I am not sure what concepts they know or how they have extended the concepts or whether they knew them already. I find that really difficult to measure but we can just keep on trying and maybe it does work [what we do]. But I do think that it is difficult on the mobile unit because you can't measure it - I mean, in a town kindergarten you might have the children for 18 months at the most but you would see them not being able to cope with scissors, to being able to cope with scissors, you would see them being extended with their collage, from just putting anything onto a piece of paper to actually choosing things to make a shape or link a picture with the collage but it is very difficult to measure on the mobile unit. I hope we are helping to bring about change because otherwise I might as well say goodbye to all of my philosophies. I am sure that they must miss out a lot on things, but at least there is something coming [ie the mobile unit], and it is something for the children, so in those terms, yes, it is good, but I do find it frustrating seeing groups only once a week.*" [Marlborough MPSU]

"*In general, I think the programme works well, keeping in mind that you are only seeing them once a week. You really have to be realistic and not try and accomplish too much with those limits. I think that the continuity side of it works well if you are prepared to do a lot of extra ground work because for the time lapse of once a week young children don't often have a good memory so we have to do a lot of overlapping. At the moment we are doing 'Autumn' as a theme and trying to run that through several weeks so we have to do a bit of overlapping with our songs and stories and poetry so they do remember. But, in general, I think that it really can work just as it would anywhere.*" [Marlborough MPSU]

"*We only see them once a week - it would be nice to see them more often but I know that it's not possible. If they have to be away one week [resulting in a two week interval between sessions] they can go backwards sometimes and you start over again from the*

> ***start so it [our work with children] is affected in that way. That is limiting [ie the infrequency] but it is still worth it. You just have to accept the reality I suppose...It's amazing just how much you can do just with one day of the week, especially when they look forward to it so much. Parents often say the children talk about the mobile all week."*** **[Waimate MPSU]**

> ***"It's harder to achieve results because you are only seeing them once as week so really each programme is separate [ie it has to be self-contained]. We can't really carry them over between sessions. If you could go more regularly, you would get better results from the children that are shy or who are having language problems and behaviour problems. But then, under the circumstances [travel etc], I don't think parents could cope with another session anyway so it's just much better than nothing and of course we do refer them to speech therapy and that if they need it and we also get them into other kindergartens sometimes if they have a problem."*** **[Waimate MPSU]**

> ***"It's a big gap seeing each group only once a week. We plan ongoing themes - two to four week blocks to get some continuity from week to week - right now we have been doing the Easter theme for a couple of weeks and will finish it off next week. We carry the same basic theme through with all eight groups. We also have ongoing themes on colour, or something like the 'beach' where we would include a trip to the beach. We don't change the theme every week.*** **[Southland MPSU]**

> ***"We always feel a bit sad that we only see them once a week but it's much, much better than nothing. The children do so much in a session."*** **[Southland MPSU]**

As can be seen from the teachers' replies, a common difficulty experienced in their work as a mobile pre-school unit teacher was maintaining continuity in the programme from week to week, due to only being able to visit groups once or twice, or at most three times a week. Infrequency of visits was also reported to result in children forgetting what they had been doing the week before and taking longer to acquire new skills. Teachers felt that they were often unable to complete as much as they wanted with each group in the time allotted, and that it was not possible to monitor children's progress as easily as in a standard kindergarten where children are seen more regularly. Teachers also mentioned that it took longer to build up a relationship with a child, especially a shy or withdrawn child, when they saw them only once or twice a week, and that having a wide age range within the same group made it much more difficult to plan a satisfactory programme to cater for all needs. Finally, one teacher commented that having multiple groups to deal with resulted in a great deal more work to organise outings (eg to the zoo etc) and special events than would be the case if there was only one, albeit larger group, involved. Despite the problems, however, teachers generally believed that what they were able to provide was a great deal better for the children and their parents than no service at all.

How Teachers Saw their Role in Providing Assistance for Particular Children

Because of the mobile nature of the units and the fact that most groups were only visited once or twice each week, it was hypothesised that teachers could find it difficult to develop a programme for individual children and to follow up on particular children from week to week. (Some support for this assumption was apparent in teachers' responses to the previous item discussed above.) For this reason, teachers were asked in the interview: 'How do you see your role in providing assistance for a particular child/children?' (Supplementary questions for the purpose of clarification were also included. These were: 'How do you go about planning work for individual children?' and 'Do you evaluate a child at one session and then use this information at a subsequent session?')

Although teachers at different mobile units had to work within the bounds imposed by the number of groups they visited each week, and the particular characteristics of each of those groups, there were, as the quotes which follow illustrate, similar themes in the respondents' accounts of their experiences and the approach that they took to cater for children who needed extra help.

> *"We are quite conscious of picking up on children with special needs or who are falling behind on something. We discuss what we should do and make an effort to set time aside to work with that child or set specific activities to develop new skills. Sometimes we will call in professionals - speech therapist, audiologist, or someone like that if we think it necessary. We share the responsibility between us and also talk things over with the parents."* [Franklin MPSU]

> *"If we notice that somebody's a bit slow on, for example, scissor skills or colours, we'll work with them. You pick up on those things and you remember and spend more time with them the next time...So we do work with individual children and provide assistance when we see it's needed. I don't personally evaluate each child, just sort of notice things - or sometimes a parent comes up and asks us to see how their child is getting on because they are a bit worried. Also, I try to make a special effort to work with the quiet ones because they don't call out for attention and sometimes they can get missed."* [Clevedon MPSU]

"If a child is in dire need of help we have actually taken time out at lunch times and after work and gone back to the home and worked out programmes that can be used in the home by the parents. We have done that this year with two children - that is only if there is acceptance by the parents that there is a speech problem or something else that needs to be checked out. We do things to check the problem out first and then suggest to the parents where they have to go next or just provide water games, colour games, card games, or books or specific learning equipment and let them use it at home with the children. Or otherwise we just do extra things with the children at sessions. One little lass just needed confidence with our equipment. She had never seen anything like it and we thought she had a learning disability but when we visited her at home we realised that she was fine at home, quite confident and able to talk and do a lot of things that she never did at kindergarten. It was just the home didn't provide much at all in the way of equipment, just television and going down the paddocks and that was about it. So we kept lending her different equipment and then she would find it again when she came to kindergarten and use it there as well, and so she was quite happy and has gotten used to using all the other [pieces of equipment] as well. She is coming on in leaps and bounds. It is really neat...The thing is, too, because we only see them twice a week it takes a while to even pick up on some of these things sometimes. [Thames MPSU]

"If we feel they need something a little extra we'll do it but I wouldn't sit here and say 'right, we're going to get Mark to do this today', but he might play at something, go 'bear hunting' or something so you incorporate what his play is into something you can provide for him. We do quite a few themes on books, read the story and then make something about it and develop it on from there...Sometimes it is a bit difficult not seeing them very often - you can get something really going but by the time you go back the following week it is lost, whereas if you could only see them again the next day you could extend on it. So you've got to have your programme sometimes which caters just for that day. If they remember it the following week then that's fine but if they don't then that's just too bad. You've just got to adapt to whatever is going. We do work with individual children and give them something that is going to help them with what they are slow on. If it's language, we'll have activities - perhaps matching tasks, and talking and discussing, and things like that, but we just do that anyway." [Lakeland MPSU]

"That's where we've got the time to spend - if one child needs some extra work with something we can do it, it's not a problem. Because if you have only got seven or eight children there then you just do it easily. I probably do that [ie spend intensive time with children on their individual needs] half the time without even realising it too, I think. [Lakeland MPSU]

"This is actually really, really difficult. We have got children now that really need extra work but you have got to be really careful how you go about doing it because all the parents are there. The parents tend to get a bit of peer pressure from other parents - that everybody should be achieving at the same level. If we have got a child that needs extra assistance - and we have done - we may have made up a book for them with colours and they have got to cut out pictures at home, the next thing we know we have got every child in that group wanting to do exactly the same or there is pressure put on the child's parent from the other parents: 'Doesn't your child know their colours yet and they are four-and-a-half?' It's actually really difficult. It has got to be done really quite cleverly. You have to grab your chances when you can - you sit down, maybe, at a table with a mother and have a chat then while all the other mothers are out in the kitchen having a gossip. You can't make a big thing of it, like you can't say to a mother 'can you see me later' because immediately everyone wants to know why you are seeing her later on.

We get very little support from Psych. Services. I get absolutely no feedback from them at all and that is really frustrating. We were having problems with two deaf children on our rolls last year (the children also attended a Taihape kindergarten some days as well). We were dealing with the problems by ourselves - people don't seem to recognise what we are doing because we are working with small groups, whereas they [ie Psych. Services] gave support to the kindergarten who saw them [the children with the hearing impairment] less often. So we don't get a lot of professional help from Psych. Services - a lot of it is possibly to do with our isolation. It's easier to go to a kindergarten in Taihape than to go the whole way out to Papanui [for example] but it makes things really quite difficult. Once again, if we have got a child with a problem we [the other teacher and I] would probably talk about it in the van and figure out what we will do the next week. It depends on the child what we do - we might just spend a little bit of extra time with that child during the session. Another thing we need is more professional support from speech therapists and public health nurses, but again, because of our isolation, it is difficult to ever get together or arrange a day for them to visit a group when we will be in the same area too - usually it's got to be organised about two months in advance. Sometimes I have got to make appointments for the children to go to a speech therapist but parents out there don't see speech as being a big problem and there is no way they are going to go to Waiouru or to Taihape or to Martin just for speech lessons for their child. Some of them can't or won't commit themselves unless advice comes from a doctor, then they will usually do something about it. It would help a lot if speech therapists and other professionals could come and talk to our groups more often."

[Hunterville MPSU]

"We try and do this [ie provide assistance for particular children] - like, at the moment, we realise that there are several children who are just aimless and we are trying to get these sort of children busy doing things and thinking for themselves...We can be limited being on the van because if you want to spontaneously do something with a child you often haven't got what you need with you, like you haven't got a particular book, or you have run out of paint. Whereas in a standard kindergarten you could just go to your storeroom and get whatever you need for a particular child. We have to decide this week that we will take 'such and such' next week for that child or children, and then they mightn't come. It's also a bit difficult to do certain things more than once." [Hunterville MPSU]

"If we think a child is having a problem we try to incorporate an activity into the programme to help that child - it might not be just specifically for that child but it will draw that child into the activity and it means that the other children can be happy with it too. So although in a way it is not an individual programme in another way it is, and you can set up the activity specially to measure that particular child's ability or disability. We do tend to talk about each group on the van as we are going there, and discuss what sort of things we are going to look for with particular children. We would really like to be able to have an individual programme for every child but we have such a diverse age group it is difficult. Also, the parents see the mobile unit as a good social time so sometimes you can't call upon them to assist with the programme so you really just do the best you can." [Marlborough MPSU]

"...we try and discuss developmental type problems through with the parents..." [Marlborough MPSU]

"If it is a child who needs help with speech I suggest a speech therapist. I have done that two or three times and I don't think that the child would have had any help if we hadn't suggested it...I don't think we have got time to do that [ie develop individual programmes for children], because there are too many children. We have got more than 80 children which makes it hard and although we don't take too much notice of the two-and-a-half years olds who come along you can't just ignore them - we work as a family group....With shy children I try to go out of my way each day to talk to that child and draw that child out...but we don't really work out things to do [in advance] with particular children. I think as a teacher you know which ones you need to notice." [Waimate MPSU]

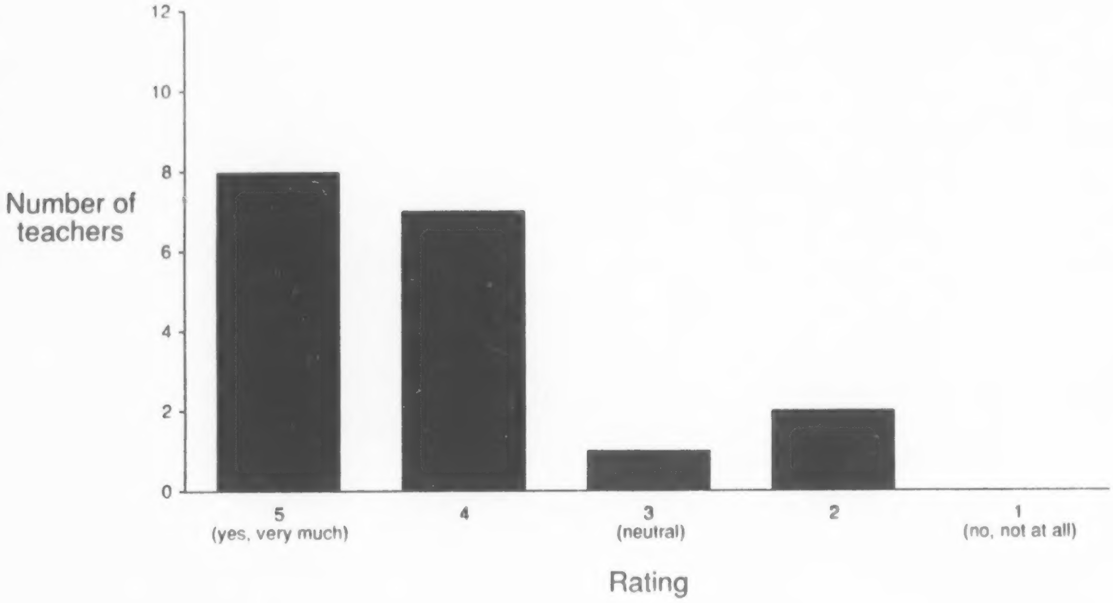
> ***"It's hard isn't it? We don't really plan a programme for individual children - except for tasks we get the older children to do in their homework books each week - we just don't have the time. But we discuss together what to look out for with particular children and make a point of talking and working with children who need extra help or attention, especially those with speech problems. If a child has to go to hospital we put a basket together with books and activities."*** **[Southland MPSU]**

From their responses, it was evident that although mobile pre-school unit teachers were seldom, due to lack of time, able to formally evaluate children or develop individualised programmes, they were very aware of the need to look out for any children having problems and to take steps to work specifically with those children at sessions. Although infrequency of sessions made their job more difficult, this was offset to a large extent by the small size of many of the mobile unit groups which allowed teachers to devote much of their time during sessions to individual children or to small groups. Teachers appeared to make good use of the time they spent travelling between groups, taking the opportunity to discuss children with problems and to develop strategies to adopt with particular children. Often, teachers discussed any problems they saw with the children's parents (where possible, advising parents how they could help and work with their own child) and, at other times, referred the child and parents to a speech therapist or other professional, as appropriate.

Teachers' General Attitudes Towards the Learning Experiences Provided for Children by Mobile Pre-School Units

Despite the limits imposed upon their work with children by the mobile nature of the units, most teachers - as shown in Figure 3.2 - generally felt that mobile units provided 'good' learning experiences for children. (Parents and parent committees - Chapter 5 - expressed similarly positive views about the quality of the learning experiences provided for children.) One of the two teachers who gave a rating of '2' commented: "I have marked '2' as we only go out once a week" (Waimate MPSU) while the other teacher (from the Thames MPSU) stated that: "There are some positive experiences but more extension of each child is needed I think."

Figure 3.2: Teachers' ratings of whether their mobile pre-school unit provided good learning experiences for children



PART III : TEACHERS AND PARENTS

Teachers' Philosophy for Working with Parents

As a way of opening a discussion of the ways in which teachers interacted with parents in the course of their work on a mobile pre-school unit, teachers were asked 'How do you feel about the role of the mobile unit teacher in relation to parents? Could you describe your current role?' Respondents stated that they felt they were often much more than just the teacher to parents - ie they felt they were also friends, advisers, and confidantes. Teachers mentioned, too, the importance of providing parent education (especially for those who were clearly very unsure of what was appropriate behaviour for the age of their child), although it was evident from their comments that teachers usually only found it possible to do this in a relatively informal way during sessions rather than organising specific parent education seminars or gatherings. It was also apparent, despite evidence - discussed in Chapter 4 and in the individual case studies - of different attitudes amongst the teachers towards having parents remain throughout sessions, that teachers in general valued their (positive) relationships with parents and tried hard to foster these. The teachers' personal accounts of their role in relation to parents follow.

> ***"For me, the most important thing in working with parents is building up their confidence and self-esteem. I find most of the women who come to our playgroups have a very low***

opinion of themselves as a woman, and are very insecure about being mothers, so there are a lot of child management questions from parents to deal with. There's also a lot of concern amongst the women about being assertive, although it's never voiced in that way. 'Empowering Women' is probably the short way of saying what I want to do here. That, to me, is the ultimate, getting the women to just trust their own instincts and feel good about their own opinions, but that's a really long process to get people to that point...I've worked with these people for over a year now and I hear some of my own messages coming back to me now, so it's working, some of it is getting through. Even some of them who may seem to an outsider to be hopeless cases at first, who are hooked into a violent way of relating, I can even see how some of these women have changed even though it may seem like just an inch compared to others who have changed miles, but that's what it's all about too on this unit, some women move an inch and some women move a mile. Trying to give these people a greater sense of values, gives them a greater sense of their own value." [YWCA MPSU]

"We are there for the parents, basically. Parents look upon us as someone they can talk to, not only about their child but about home problems that they might have, anything that goes on in their lives. We are part of their lives. They look up to us, which I don't really like, because you are trying to get them to accept you as being one of them. I find that the worst thing about my work is the fact that I am not a mother, so a lot of the experiences that they are talking about I haven't experienced myself. But our role with parents is a very important one although just building that relationship up with them is the hardest." [YWCA MPSU]

"I consider the parents as being a very vital part of the mobile unit. We seem to lean on them, probably a lot more than what an ordinary kindergarten would. Without the parents' help the mobile would probably be very hard to run. I like to be open and friendly towards the parents and make them feel welcome so if they perhaps did have something they wanted to discuss with you, they would know that you were there and would feel at ease enough to be able to come up and chat to you." [Franklin MPSU]

"I feel that parents who live in more isolated areas like to come up and check with us about their children, and some like to stay the whole session, even when they're not rostered, just to get that contact with other adults, to talk to other mums. They're all very interested in the programme." [Franklin MPSU]

"The mobile is not only important for our relationship with the parents but also for their relationship with each other...In Kawakawa Bay where it's more isolated, they're not out

seeing other parents very frequently, so not only is it a social occasion for their children to come to kindergarten, but it's a social occasion for them as well. So our role with parents is not only as a professional but is also social as well - we talk to parents about things that have got nothing to do with the children, but also we are the professional they want." [Clevedon MPSU]

"A bit of everything, from everybody's mother to everybody's mentor I think. Some parents don't need any help whatsoever, they are fine, but if we find a problem child we then start looking at the parents, at the home, which means you end up finding out what is going on or that they need outside help - if they are willing to accept outside help. You have got to tread very carefully though. You have got to let them know nicely that you know that there is something going on and do they want you to do anything, are they ready for anything constructive yet, 'cause you have got to wait until the problem is bad enough or they are down enough, or sick enough or something sometimes to actually realise that there is something wrong. And, of course, there are always the parents who just come and sit down next to you to have a chat about things because they know we are from outside their community and not part of the local gossip chain and so they know that whatever they tell us will go no further. That is something that I think they all do know that we [the teachers] carry around a lot of information with us but it doesn't go any further so that's important to many parents.

What I have come to learn, though, is that I never get friendly friendly with my parents, I mean we get on fine but none of this bosom buddy type of thing ever. There is still this professional-parent business that must be upheld because if a crisis does occur we have to become the professional regardless of whether we are a friend and sometimes I have had to be in the situation where I have to say, 'Look, this is something that has got to be checked out - the child has to go to a specialist or really needs to see a speech therapist or someone about something physical." [Thames MPSU]

"My current role with parents is different to what I think it should be - I feel as if I'm their support system - I feel this should be a less major part of my work. My major role should be with the children, I feel." [Thames MPSU]

"Our kindergarten groups are always open-house to parents so they can come and stay anytime they wish. They are always willing to help us with activities if we need them or if they want to. A lot of our mothers use us as a social contact for themselves, especially in the isolated areas where they don't have a lot of contact with other adults. They quite like to come [to sessions], and they talk about their own children and compare their development - whether that's good or bad I don't know but it makes them feel better

about it [ie their child's development]. Our town parents [ie the Nukuhau group] are a little different because they have more contact [with other adults] and they are obviously more involved within their own clubs - like they'll belong to social clubs or they'll belong to sporting clubs, whereas our way-out-in-the-country mothers don't always have that opportunity to get together." [Lakeland MPSU]

"I think the mobile is a great social time for the parents - I think it probably does them as much good as it does the children. And I think the parents feel they can talk to us as well. They talk to us a lot about their children. And they feel they can - they ask us for advice about things. Because for a lot of them, we are the only other adults they may see, except for their husbands of course, during the week. No, I think it's good, our relationship with parents. I think we've got a good rapport." [Lakeland MPSU]

"I think they see us as professionals and I think they do respect what we are doing although once again they tend to like to see us sitting down and teaching the children. We have battles with some parents where they want us to teach the children to write their names, and think we should be teaching the children their colours, things like that. We have to spend a lot of time explaining to parents that a lot of those skills come through using lots and lots of language and talking with the children and stuff like that. So our role is often educating the parents as much as the children." [Hunterville MPSU]

"I think some of the more isolated parents see us as their one link to the world during the week. Some days, you know that some parents just want to have a quiet chat to you about something, it mightn't be anything do with the kindergarten or their children but they just like to talk to someone else who is not in their community, or get your advice on something. I think you are sort of a counsellor, plus teacher, plus friend to a lot of the parents. Some of the parents you are nothing at all to - I suppose they don't see you in that light and they wouldn't ever think of talking to you about a problem except to do with their child. [Hunterville MPSU]

"I think our role with parents is really important because if the parents are happy then the children will be happy and if the parents are learning things they will hopefully pass it on, so you do need to work very closely with the parents. I think that in my role as the mobile teacher they actually look to me for advice and help when they are bringing up their children. Some people find it really difficult, they don't really know where their children are at and that is perfectly understandable. Just because we give birth to a child doesn't mean to say that we would know everything about what is happening and what we should do for that child. I mean, I find it difficult to buy books for 10, 11, 12 year olds because I

am not really sure at what reading level they are, whereas for the pre-school children plus age-groups I know exactly. So we have quite a big role on the mobile unit, because we can advise parents on what toys to get, advise on any problems they are having - such as behavioural problems - with their children. Because parents see us every week, after a while they get to know us quite well, they feel confident that they can ask questions. We also sometimes have to be a peace maker in some groups where parents have different opinions or there are groups with little in common with each other. We have to be careful that we are seen in an unbiased way; we have to be sympathetic to everybody and show no favouritism. You have to weigh up both sides and not be drawn into their arguments, we have to be seen to be kind to both sides. Being a listener is really important. You also have to be a good communicator - on the mobile unit that is absolutely essential. There is probably a lot of things we are on the van, not just teachers. The parent work is just really important, it is imperative that the parents feel confident in you because if they don't, then you are going to have a [negative] response from the community and the kids will eventually miss out." [Marlborough MPSU]

"You get to know the parents fairly well and you can reassure them. I find a lot of the young parents need reassuring. I am amazed at how many young mothers think their 12 to 15 month old child should be doing what a three year old does. It would really amaze you. You come across this, not all the time, but quite a bit, so your role there really is to, as tactfully as you can, try to explain that their child just isn't old enough to be doing these things. Recently I found a book that I am going to have some photocopying done from and I'm going to try and hand some information out to some of these people. They are expecting far too much of their children, so our role is perhaps educating some parents but there again the time limit is a problem...We are educating some of them, reassuring others, that's the main thing, reassuring them that their child [is normal], reassuring parents of shy children and encouraging them to just keep coming once a week and explaining to them that just because another child is doing something at that age, don't expect your child to do that too. It's a matter of education isn't it?" [Waimate MPSU]

"We are there as a back up for the parents. They are free to come and talk to us although it is hard to always set aside time to do that with our work with the children as well. Sometimes we stay behind and talk to some of the parents if we think there are problems...On the mobile we are providing a situation though, for the parents to get together and talk. When there is one of those situations - like the bad floods awhile ago - it is absolutely essential for them to talk. It was an outlet for them and they got it out of their system so virtually you are providing an opportunity for the mothers to sort of forget about their children for a while, knowing they are being looked after, which is essential for

> *some of them. Some of them have got financial problems and its an opportunity for them to talk about them and get them off their chest. And if the mums have any queries about their children they come and ask you. I think it is good for them to see their children mixing with other children and to see their children developing. Of course, unfortunately some of them seem to think that their children should be up at the stage of older children. Some people have got no idea of child development whatsoever and try to force their children to do things they're not ready for, and call them a 'sissy' or something like that if they refuse. It's a shame. If we had more access to things [on parent education/child development] we could hand out to parents it would be helpful. It's a matter of trying to find out the right material to hand out - we have got a book at the moment which is a real beaut. and we are going to photocopy some material to hand out."* [Waimate MPSU]

> *"We have a variety of roles with parents. They like to see us in that 'teacher role' - to carry out 'discipline' of their children. We are also friends and advisers too. Some of the parents are really good friends - we banter and joke away and they take it in good part. Others, you don't get to know so well. I don't make parents my top priority - I feel I'm there for the children first and the parents second but I always try to be available to talk to them if they want to - even if they want to talk at most inopportune moments sometimes."* [Southland MPSU]

As can be established from the quotes given above, although all teachers felt that their interactions and work with parents was an important aspect of their work, the situation at the YWCA unit was rather different. Unlike at the other units, the focus of the YWCA mobile pre-school teachers was to work **first and foremost** with the parents (specifically, women), their philosophy being that helping to improve the quality of life for women will eventually have a positive outcome for the children as well. The YWCA was also rather different from the other mobile units in that its teachers were primarily there to **facilitate** the maintenance and running of existing parent run playgroups, whereas teachers at the other units seemed more to lead the groups associated with their mobile units. (This appeared to be the way parents wanted it and, as shown later in this chapter and again in Chapter 5, few groups of parents, other than at the YWCA unit[16], ran their own sessions on the days that the mobile van did not visit their area.)

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[16] Although the YWCA teachers commented that even parents at these groups often seemed to like the idea of the teachers 'taking charge'.

Teachers' Role in Educating Parents about Early Childhood Education and Care

Given the relative infrequency with which mobile pre-school units were [and are] able to visit the various groups in their areas, and the correspondingly limited amount of time that children were able to attend pre-school, it was felt that teachers could perhaps have an important role to play in, for example, helping parents work with their children at home between visits of the mobile unit. For this reason, teachers were asked in the interview to comment on how they perceived their 'role in educating parents about early childhood education and care?'

As is apparent from many of the teachers' earlier comments, although the provision of some sort of parent education was often seen to be both a necessary and a most desirable aspect of their work, it was not a simple matter to organise this, at least not in any formal, organised way (such as seminars and so on), especially with the limited time available and the amount of travelling involved (for both teachers and parents). However, in response to the question stated above, teachers felt that an important part of their work involved acting as role models for parents - ie they were conscious of trying to demonstrate, by example, positive and effective ways of interacting and working with children. Teachers also commented that much of their 'parent education' work was more a matter of reassuring parents about their children, and what they (the parents) were doing with or for their children.

Thus, although teachers stated that they wished they could provide more formal parent education, this was not always possible, due not only to the problems involved in organising it, but also because parents did not always want it. The teachers therefore mainly confined themselves to providing as good a role model for parents as possible, to being available to answer any queries from parents, and to making information available to parents by means of a parent library, items on the parent notice board, information sheets for all new parents, and by publishing pieces in newsletters. (One or two teachers noted that it was difficult finding material to hand out to parents that was not too complex.) The specific replies that teachers gave to the question of their role in respect to parent education follow.

> ***"Parent education is our most important role. I feel that educating parents is a subtle ongoing thing. It's hardly ever specific. There are times when we organise workshops - things like positive parenting groups, sexuality workshops - where we invite people in to do it, but that's mainly because of not wanting to set ourselves up as the experts. I try and develop the similarities between myself and the other women, rather than emphasise the differences. I use role modelling so that hopefully people will see me behaving in a way that creates change they can recognise and they will pick up those skills. I feel that is a much more effective way of passing on skills than sitting down in a workshop type session or***

lecture session. It takes a lot longer for us to do it that way but it's much more effective." [YWCA MPSU]

"We are there to educate the parents...One thing that I find difficult is to try not to put down the parents' ideas, their ideas of how to educate their children. It might be something that we think is totally ridiculous but you have got to try and adapt their ideas to your way of thinking so as not to give them the impression that whatever they are going to suggest we are not going to like it." [YWCA MPSU]

"Mostly by example, I think - parents can see the way we work, interact with the children. We also have a really good parent library which we encourage parents to use and sometimes we put information up on the notice board...If parents ask me a question I certainly endeavour to find out if I don't know the answer or refer the parent to an outside professional for help. We try and help by showing our support." [Clevedon MPSU]

"We don't do much as [formal] parent education - such as film evenings - as I was used to in a standard kindergarten because of the travelling we have to do. The committees are left to organise things like that. But we try and help parents with anything they want to know about their children." [Franklin MPSU]

"I have been trying to organise, this term, parent morning and afternoon teas and have particular speakers out to talk on different educational aspects - speech therapists and people like that which I think would be quite good if it's done in an informal way so people don't feel threatened by it. We also have a parent library which contains lots of books on child development and cover the whole aspect of pre-school education right from babies through to when they start school, and also books on different sorts of programmes, like on speech and writing, even mothering skills and things like that." [Franklin MPSU]

"When I first started on the mobile, because we were such a different form of pre-school, we did parent education for two years. We ran courses, we did all sorts of things. I think we got more flak out of doing that than if we had left them alone. But as I was just thinking now, well I was a lot younger when we were doing it then too. Now, I've sort of got this open policy - if they want to ask us anything, please ask. We have made that booklet [ie information book for new parents to read on the aims of pre-school education and elements of child development] - we only got that underway last year and it took me three months to write so it was worded right. We condensed it as much as possible so there was not too much and just left it at that. If anyone wants to know anything they are very free to ask...Getting parents out at night is jolly hard and you can't do parent

education during a session. And whatever you do with parents, if you don't do it at night you have got the children and you never know whether they are coming because they want to or coming because they think they should do it because they like you as a teacher or something like that. I know it [parent education] has its place because it works quite well in playcentre although even at playcentres you get people coming up and saying how they got sick to death with these classes they had to go to because they didn't want to go, they just want to go to a pre-school with their kids. They don't want to become heavy learners of anything - they just want time out from the kids and time out for themselves. But if anyone asks for it we are happy to do it. We have noticed positive outcomes of parent education sessions - such as when parents finally realise how their children feel when adults keep criticising their paintings etc and telling them it should be done like this or like that. But there are also more upsetting outcomes of parent education sessions...Last year we got that Rolf Harris videotape (on child molestation) and took that around to all the groups and found out that a few mothers had been molested themselves. That is why [use of] the tapes are so hairy [ie fraught with problems/uncertainties] - [ie] you show it to the parents so that they can get it and show it to their kids and then you find you have got the parents with the problems and we are not geared for that. They really need proper counsellors but we managed to get them referred to where they should be. Two of them have actually come through brilliantly, two didn't come through so well. One of them just collapsed in the middle of the video [with] a shriek of tears and I thought 'Oh, no', but I realised that this sort of thing could happen. It was rather shattering and it puts you off for a little while, it gets a bit too much, but that is the drastic side of it (it's not all like that)." [Thames MPSU]

"I think teachers' role in educating parents has changed enormously ever the years. I think parents are looking to us for a lot of advice, whether they are doing the right thing or not. I think they mainly want reassurance. And sometimes if they've got a problem and it's not working out they look to us for answers. If they ask us for advice we'll give them the time because our numbers are small enough to be able to give them that time. We don't say 'Oh, we'll see you after the session, because they want to go home too. So we give them the time that they need. Not that we've got all the answers but giving reassurance seems to be the main thing." [Lakeland MPSU]

"They learn a lot from us I think because none of them are afraid to ask anything...We are role models too, although whether they put it into practice is another story but at least you give it a try...We're here, in this situation for the parents almost as much as the children anyway. You've got to get on with parents because if they don't like you they're not going

to come. And that would be to our disadvantage and the children's disadvantage." [Lakeland MPSU]

"Mostly, I get other people in to do parent education sessions - when I can. Last year I had a public health nurse going around all the groups showing a video on child molestation and we take the dental nurses out with us in the van, but once again, to organise people to visit is not at all straightforward and you have to do it weeks in advance." [Hunterville MPSU]

"I think our role is quite important. We try to educate them on theories of pre-school education but often we are just preaching to the converted and the ones that have problems understanding don't usually want to know. And we don't get a lot of time to spend with any individual parent to explain what we are doing and it's pretty difficult to get other outside people in to talk to them. They don't really want this anyway because they meet only once a week and it's often their time for a chat and a cup of coffee with the other mothers so they don't seem to want anything specific set up for that time for them [eg] the Plunket nurse or the health nurse coming and giving their speech. But we always have a parents' notice board and we try to put as much as possible on that and change it about once a fortnight or so with different ideas and different themes each time. Hopefully they read it but we always hope they will come and ask us anything they want to know, which a lot of them do." [Hunterville MPSU]

"We mainly just answer parents' queries as they arise. It would be nice to have a permanent REAP person in the area to help with that side of things [parent education] because there's just not the time to do everything. We have had the public health nurse along to show videos which the parents enjoy - we wish we could do it more often." [Marlborough MPSU]

"We have the public health nurse come along spasmodically to most groups - it would be great if she was able to come along on a more regular basis but she's a busy person. We also have the speech therapist visit and we advertise that she is coming so that parents will hopefully come along. There seems to be more need of this type of help for the children than in the past.

At the AGM I invite the senior teacher and the District Officer [Early Childhood Education] along to talk to the new parent committee members about the set up of the mobile - so the parents can see we are part of an [early childhood education] system. We do have an adult library on child care etc etc. We print news items sometimes and also hand out song sheets of the songs we sing at sessions. It can be very difficult getting the message

across to parents about what we want to do with the children and why." **[Southland MPSU]**

Goals for Working with Parents

In order to obtain some added data on the mobile pre-school unit teachers' philosophy in relation to parents, a series of goals for working with parents was included in the rating schedule. Teachers indicated how important they felt each goal was, and the extent to which they considered the goal was achieved at their mobile unit, on two five-point rating scales ranging from 'Very important' to 'Not at all important' and from 'Almost always achieved' to 'Rarely or never achieved', with the mid-point in each case being labelled a 'neutral' response. Table 3.3 records the results.

Not unexpectedly, in view of their stated philosophies, teachers placed a high level of importance on the goals of maintaining regular contact with parents (as indicated elsewhere, this contact was primarily during, or shortly before or after, session times and at committee meetings) and having a good relationship with parents (goals g and h in Table 3.3); they also felt that they had considerable success in achieving each of these goals in the course of their work. (Observational data, discussed in Chapter 4, give added support to this finding.) 'Parents benefiting on a personal level' from their association with their mobile unit (goal i) was also considered important (Figure 3.3), although as some mobile unit teachers did not encourage all parents to remain during sessions to the same extent as others, the stated level of overall achievement (Figure 3.4) of this goal, while still high, was not quite as great as for the two previously mentioned goals[17].

The majority of teachers (15) placed a high priority on the importance of parents helping with 'housekeeping' tasks (they acknowledged that, without parent help on such tasks, it would be a great deal more difficult to run the mobile unit effectively) but a considerably lower priority on encouraging parents to work with children (goal a) during sessions. (This appeared to be not so much because they did not feel this was a worthwhile goal but because they were aware that parents did not always want to do this - either because they lacked confidence or because they wished to have a break from children and a chance to interact with other adults.)

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[17] The finding, as shown in Figure 3.4, that 83% (15) of teachers felt that this goal was always or almost always achieved corresponds closely to the figure of 82% for parents who felt that they benefited considerably from their association with a mobile pre-school unit (Table 5.10, Chapter 5).

Table 3.3: Teachers' views of the importance of various (given) goals for working with parents and how often they felt the stated goals were achieved at their mobile unit (N)

Goal for working with parents		Ratings 1 N	Ratings 2 N	Ratings 3 N	Ratings 4 N	Ratings 5 N		8 (missing data) N	9 (item designated 'not applicable' by the teachers) N
a Parents being encouraged to work with children during mobile unit sessions is...	...very important ...almost always achieved	8 5	1 6	6 3	2 1	- 2	...not at all important ...rarely or never achieved	1 1	- -
b Teachers explaining the philosophy and objectives of the mobile unit's programme to parents is...	...very important ...almost always achieved	9 2	8 10	- 4	1 2	- -	...not at all important ...rarely or never achieved	- -	- -
c Mobile unit staff encouraging parents to work with their children (on tasks set out by the teachers) at home between visits of the van is...	...very important ...almost always achieved	5 2	2 4	4 3	4 4	3 5	...not at all important ...rarely or never achieved	- -	- -
d Teaching parents skills to enable them to run sessions on the days the unit does not visit is...	...very important ...almost always achieved	4 1	2 1	5 1	1 6	3 6	...not at all important ...rarely or never achieved	- -	3 3
e Parents having some say in how the session programme is run is...	...very important ...almost always achieved	2 1	3 2	8 6	1 4	3 4	...not at all important ...rarely or never achieved	1 1	- -
f Parents taking an active part in the setting up/packing away of equipment and other 'housekeeping' tasks is...	...very important ...almost always achieved	14 13	1 4	1 1	1 -	1 -	...not at all important ...rarely or never achieved	- -	- -
g Teachers maintaining regular contact with parents is...	...very important ...almost always achieved	14 12	4 6	- -	- -	- -	...not at all important ...rarely or never achieved	- -	- -
h Teachers having a good relationship with parents is...	...very important ...almost always achieved	17 11	1 7	- -	- -	- -	...not at all important ...rarely or never achieved	- -	- -
i Parents benefiting on a personal level (ie as distinct from matters concerning their children) from the mobile unit is...	...very important ...almost always achieved	11 8	6 7	1 3	- -	- -	...not at all important ...rarely or never achieved	- -	- -

Note: N = 18

Apart from the YWCA teachers who considered it very important for parents to have some say in the session programme (goal e), and, to teach parents skills to run sessions on the days that the mobile unit did not visit (goal d), there was not an especially high level of support overall from teachers for these particular goals. This may have been because, despite often being unhappy with the amount of time that the mobile pre-school unit was able to give to specific groups, teachers in general - as well as the parents themselves - nevertheless found it difficult to overcome the expectation that they had ultimate responsibility for providing the pre-school education programme. (Encouraging parents to work with children at home - goal c - also received a generally lower level of support. See too, goal p, in Table 3.2 relating to teachers providing 'homework' for parents to do at home with their children.)

How Teachers Felt Parents Saw their Role as Mobile Pre-School Unit Teachers

In response to the question 'How do you think parents see your role as a mobile unit teacher?', most respondents indicated that they felt that parents regarded them not only as a 'professional person' but also as someone who provided both friendship and support. As well, teachers indicated that many parents thought of them as people who would take good care of their children, giving them a chance to either spend time talking to other parents during sessions or to do something else altogether, away from the kindergarten. Some teachers felt, too, that parents expected a great deal of them - ie that they should know all the answers and be able to teach children everything they, as parents, thought essential.

As has been mentioned before, the structure and working philosophy of the YWCA mobile unit was somewhat different from the other units because teachers acted as facilitators at groups for which parents were primarily responsible, and also focused on parents (women) first, and children second. These basic differences between the YWCA and the other mobile pre-school units is apparent in the following comments made by teachers from the various units.

> ***"One of the first things they expect is assistance with their programme. They like you to provide activities and to talk to them about the activities. They would really like you to take over. In fact, they don't want to do anything for themselves but while that's their expectation they recognise, usually, that that's not realistic and that you are not going to do that. They expect you to have an incredible knowledge of child rearing because you are trained - they expect you to have the answers. The way I handle that is not to have the answers but to give some different perspectives on it, so that it isn't me telling them what to do...They want you to be a listener, they expect to be able to claim a lot of your time and to talk about any problems that they are having. They expect you to represent them in a way, for example, if someone wanted to go to Social Welfare quite often they ask you***

Figure 3.3: Teachers' ratings of the importance of parents benefiting on a personal level from their association with a mobile unit

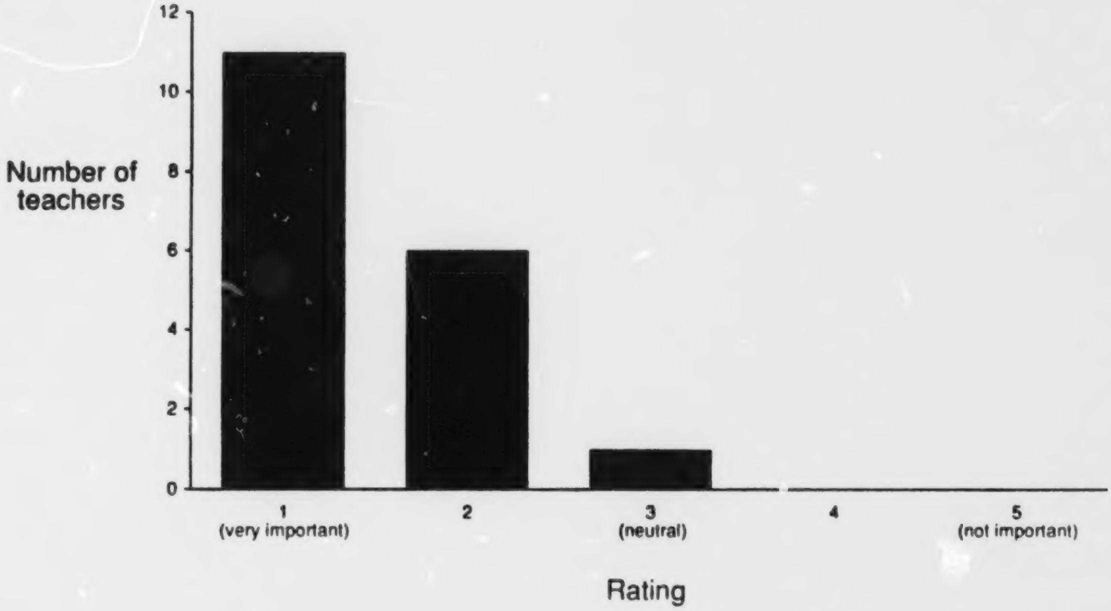
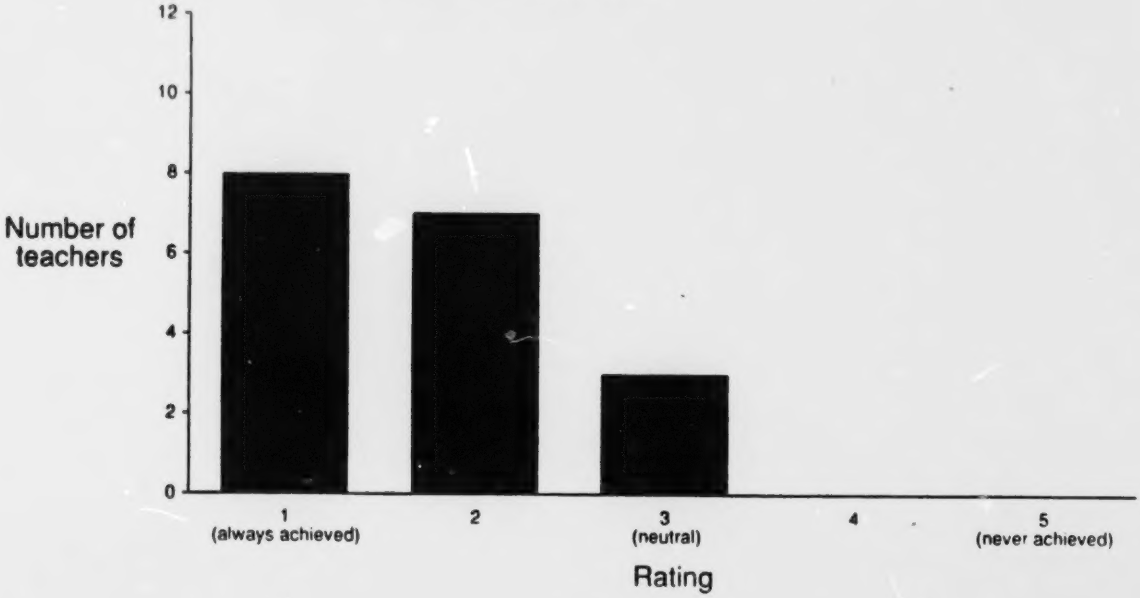


Figure 3.4: Teachers' ratings of the extent to which they felt the goal of parents benefiting on a personal level from association with a mobile unit was achieved



to ring up and organise things and perhaps go with them. So moral support and representation comes in a lot. They expect you to be their friend but they certainly don't expect you to put them down and they expect you to understand what they are talking about without making judgements." [YWCA MPSU]

"They think of us professionals who can teach their children. They want to see children achieving and coming home with things they have painted or made. They want their children to learn to write their names, use scissors and things like that. I think a lot of them see us as baby sitters too." [Franklin MPSU]

"They see us as professionals who are supposed to know all sorts of things about child rearing...I also think they need us, the kindergarten, for the break they get from their children, for the contact they get with other parents, and just to get some peace and quiet. They know when their child's with us they've got some other children to play with and to talk to, and that they are learning because of all the equipment we've got." [Clevedon MPSU]

"I feel they see me like a supervisor at a playcentre which bothers me. They're so grateful for any pre-school facility that they just accept things. They also perceive me as a support for them and as someone who does nice things for kids and is friendly to them [the parents] [Thames MPSU]

"I think they see us in a good light. We're very friendly - mates, I suppose - it sounds silly but they don't put us up here [ie on a pedestal] as teachers. But maybe it's our attitude towards them - we're very friendly." [Lakeland MPSU]

"Basically they see us providing a social and learning time for the children. Also it's an outing for them [the parents] - to get out of the house." [Lakeland MPSU]

"I think they probably see us as their sanity for the week - when they can get a break while someone else is in charge of the children for once. Others expect a lot from us that we obviously don't give - they want their children to learn to read and write. But generally I think the parents see us as important professional people coming into their community. I think it makes them feel good and important, especially these days with the rural decline and so much being taken away from rural people. They feel really privileged, probably, that we do go to their areas and most of them make a really big effort to be there. Some of them travel a long way so that their children can come." [Hunterville MPSU]

"Definitely that we're there to educate their children, although often I don't really think they know exactly what that means...They also think that we should be able to do just about everything - to answer all their questions and know all the ills of the children [etc]. We are expected to be pretty super people really. They don't accept that you might have an off day, they expect you to be happy and bright and gay at every session. There is no allowance for you to have an off day. Of course, the children don't really notice whether you are having a bad day or not but the parents do, because we work so closely with the parents and they obviously watch you all of the time. You do get tired, I think because you are on the road all the time, but they do expect you to be the life and sole of the party and that you will solve everything and be all knowledgeable: 'You should know, you are the teacher'." [Marlborough MPSU]

"Generally, I think they probably look to us as a professional type person who they expect to 'educate' their children, to provide them with all of those pre-school opportunities that we are trained to offer, to provide all the areas of play, social, emotional, physical, intellectual and so on, and generally for their children to have a lot of fun in learning. I think they expect us to prepare them for school because that tradition hasn't really diminished. It is still very strong." [Marlborough MPSU]

"I think they like to see us working with their children." [Waimate MPSU]

"We are there to provide the session for the children to get together...and I think a majority of them want us to do a certain amount of 'discipline' - some say to us straight out that they feel we will get better results if we try to do the discipline, say with a disruptive under two-and-a-half year old, because the child has got to the stage of ignoring mum. And they ask us for information and some often ask for suggestions for things they can do at home." [Waimate MPSU]

"The parents see us, as teachers, being in charge." [Southland MPSU]

The Nature of Teachers' Relationships with Parents

Table 3.4 below shows the way in which teachers rated their relationships with parents while Table 3.5 shows how respondents perceived parents' attitudes towards them as mobile pre-school unit teachers.

Table 3.4: Teachers' ratings of their relationships with parents

	Ratings (Semantic Differential)										
Scale (nature of the relationship)	1		2		3		4		5		
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	Scale
Warm	10	55.6	5	27.8	1	5.6	-	-	-	-	Cool
Close	3	16.7	7	38.9	6	33.3	-	-	-	-	Distant
Know them well	3	16.7	6	33.3	6	33.3	1	5.6	-	-	Don't know them well
Personal	1	5.6	1	5.6	5	27.8	8	44.4	1	5.6	Professional

Note: Two respondents did not give ratings because they felt that they could not generalise - eg "Depending on the session or individual parent the answers could range from 1 - 5." (Percentages have, however, been calculated on the total number of teachers - 18).

Table 3.5: Respondents' ratings of how parents made them feel in their position as a mobile pre-school unit teacher

	Ratings (Semantic Differential)										
Scale (how parents made them feel)	1		2		3		4		5		
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	Scale
Competent	11	61.1	7	38.9	-	-	-	-	-	-	Incompetent
In control	6	33.3	10	55.6	2	11.1	-	-	-	-	Powerless
Superior[a]	-	-	4	22.2	14	77.8	-	-	-	-	Inferior
Approved of	12	66.7	6	33.3	-	-	-	-	-	-	Disapproved of

[a] Note that the mid-point of this scale was designated as being 'equal' with parents. The mid-points of the remaining scales were unlabelled.

In general, teachers seemed to feel that they had a warm and positive relationship with most parents (often getting to know individual parents well) while still maintaining a basically professional approach as befitted their position and training. This was a generally similar result to the views expressed by parent committees on the nature of parents' relationships with teachers (Table 5.12 in Chapter 5).

Likely Topics for Discussion between Teachers and Parents

As a further way of establishing the sorts of relationships that occurred between teachers and parents, teachers were asked to rate on a five-point scale how likely it was for them to discuss various (given) topics with parents (Table 3.6).

As can be seen from Table 3.6, teachers, not unexpectedly, felt that their most likely topics of conversation with parents, apart from general conversation[18] (topic j), were those which related directly to children (topics a, b, c and d). Teachers were much less likely to discuss aspects of the running and organisation of the mobile pre-school unit (apart from the parents' role in relation to 'housekeeping' tasks) and, as mentioned elsewhere, to talk about parents running their own sessions on days when the mobile unit did not visit. Again, this may have been because both teachers and parents frequently appeared to feel that policy matters, planning a programme, and organising and running sessions were more appropriately the concern of teachers ('the professionals') than of the parents (c.f. goal e in Table 3.3 which suggested that relatively few teachers felt that it was important for parents to have some say in the running of the session programme). Just over half of the teachers interviewed (10) felt that discussion of parents' personal problems[19] was a likely topic when talking to (some) parents.

In brief, the data presented in Table 3.6 seems to give added support to the finding that the relationships that teachers had with parents involved being friends, advisers and confidantes, while still maintaining the role of a professional, trained early childhood education worker.

Whether Mobile Pre-School Teachers' Role with Parents Differed from that of Teachers in a 'Standard' Kindergarten

When asked whether they thought their role as a mobile pre-school teacher in relation to parents was different from the role of a 'conventional' kindergarten teacher respondents generally thought that it was. They felt that they were able to get to know parents better (despite the relative infrequency of visits to their different groups) because parents, unlike in town

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[18] As discussed in Chapter 4, previous research has shown that casual conversation (eg talking about topics such as the weather, TV programmes, local items of interest and so on) promotes positive relationships between parents and staff and helps to facilitate an environment in which parents are more likely to discuss matters of greater import with the teachers if they feel the need.

[19] There is evidence from other research studies that teachers discuss parents' problems with them, although the frequency varies. Renwick (1989), for example, asked teachers to estimate how often they discussed parent problems with parents. Her results showed that: "Teachers' perceptions of the frequency with which they discuss parent problems ranged from 4 percent who said they 'rarely' did to nearly a quarter who said they 'frequently' did. About a third said they did so either 'occasionally' or 'quite often'." (p.71)

Table 3.6: Teachers' ratings of the likelihood of discussing certain topics with parents

Topic of discussion	Ratings						
	1 ('very likely')	2	3	4	5 ('very unlikely')	8 (missing data)	9 (designated 'not applicable' by the respondent)
	N	N	N	N	N	N	N
a Activities of children at sessions.	9	5	4	-	-	-	-
b Problems with children at sessions.	4	10	3	-	1	-	-
c Activities of children at home.	3	11	3	1	-	-	-
d Problems with children at home.	2	12	2	2	-	-	-
e Arrangements for picking up and dropping off children.	3	6	3	2	4	-	-
f Policy matters for unit.	1	2	5	6	3	1	-
g Mobile unit's programme.	1	3	5	8	1	-	-
h Parent-organised sessions.	1	1	2	1	8	-	5
i Parents' problems.	4	6	1	5	2	-	-
j General conversation.	9	7	2	-	-	-	-
k Parents' role in housekeeping tasks.	5	8	2	2	-	1	-
l Parent's role as helpers.	4	6	6	-	1	1	-

Note: N = 18

kindergartens often remained throughout sessions; also the small size of many groups meant that they were able to devote time to parents (see Chapter 4) without constant interruptions or competing demands upon their time. Again, this resulted in teachers feeling that they were able to relate to parents not only on a professional level but also as friends and advisers. Some teachers mentioned, too, that parental presence meant that they were perhaps more conscious of the way in which they worked with children and that they were more likely to have to answer questions about what they were doing or to respond to parents' concerns about their children. In the case of the YWCA unit, the teachers reported that their role with parents was markedly different from that of standard kindergartens because, as previously stated, their focus was primarily on the women, rather than on the children.

The Ways in which Teachers Made Provision for Contact with Parents

In view of the geographical spread of the communities that they served, teachers were asked in what ways they made contact with parents if they wanted to talk to them about their children or other matters. The majority of teachers replied that they were generally unable to have organised contact with parents other than during session times (and/or shortly before or after sessions) because of lack of time, the amount of travelling involved in their job and because parents' homes were so widespread. Teachers at three or four units, however, did make a practise of contacting parents by phone if they felt it necessary, while others managed to fit in some home visits - usually at lunch-times, before travelling on to the afternoon session. Parent committee meetings and fundraising events also provided opportunities for teachers to get together with parents they particularly wanted to see. The specific provisions that teachers mentioned for making contact with parents are summarised, by mobile unit, below.

YWCA: Contact with parents was made during sessions, by telephone, and by means of home visits on a fairly regular basis. Both teachers also found that they often, for example, encountered parents while shopping or when eating at McDonalds. They found such contact to be an important way of keeping up-to-date with what the parents were doing. More formal provisions for keeping in contact with parents was made by means of two camps which they ran each year specifically for the women; an additional camp for both parents and children also allowed ample opportunity for parents and teachers to interact. As well, the teachers noted that they were able to talk to parents at each group's parent committee meetings, at the workshops (such as a recently held one on psychodrama) they organised from time to time, and at the seminars to which they invited Plunket and public health nurses along to talk to parents.

Clevedon: The teachers stated that they did not normally home visit, but mainly made contact with parents before, during and after sessions and/or at parent committee meetings. They kept in regular contact, albeit in a less direct way, by regularly sending information home to parents by means of notices and newsletters, and by posting items of interest on their parent notice board.

Franklin: At this mobile unit, the teachers did not carry out home visits but felt they were able to have adequate contact with parents by means of the telephone (eg calls to potential new parents to explain aspects of the mobile unit), and at sessions and parent committee meetings.

Thames: If they considered there was a problem concerning a child, the teachers definitely made a home visit (as long as the family agreed), otherwise they had a great deal of contact with parents before, during and after sessions, at fundraising activities, and at the monthly committee meetings for each group.

Lakeland: "We don't go home visiting because that's just impractical for our situation. We just see people at sessions - we have the time to talk to parents then."

Hunterville: The teachers, particularly the head teacher, spent considerable time (often in the evenings or at weekends) making or receiving calls from parents on matters relating to the mobile pre-school unit. The teachers relied on the phone because they felt it was impossible for them to do home visits given the distances involved - it would also have meant (because of Department of Education restrictions on the total weekly mileage allowed) using their own cars if they had wished to do so. They therefore just saw parents at sessions and other mobile pre-school related events.

Marlborough: The Marlborough mobile pre-school unit teachers made regular home visits (at the invitation of parents) during their lunch-times. They also contacted parents by telephone when required and talked with them at sessions. As well, they arranged regular group outings - sometimes combining groups - which they felt were not only beneficial for the children but also gave them an excellent opportunity to have additional contact with the parents.

Waimate: Like the Franklin, Clevedon, Lakeland and Hunterville teachers, the Waimate teachers also felt that it was just not feasible for them to carry out home visits; again, their major means of making contact with parents was making a particular effort to set aside time to talk to them before, during or after sessions.

Southland: The teachers at this unit said that they sometimes home visited; from time to time parents also invited them for lunch, for example, when it was their child's birthday. They also made and received calls from parents during the Wednesday and Friday afternoon administration and planning sessions, but otherwise were available for parents at session times.

Whether Teachers Encouraged Parents to Become Involved in Sessions

When asked whether or not they 'encourage[d] parents to become involved in the mobile unit's sessions', although all teachers said that they did, some only wanted this to be within certain limits. A major reason for some teachers wanting there to be some limits was because they felt that having too many parents present at once led to crowded, noisy conditions; they also felt that children sometimes needed a chance to be independent of their parents. In addition, teachers felt hesitant about getting parents to do too much (apart from 'requiring' a parent roster system, whereby parents took turns each session to prepare morning/afternoon tea and to help unpack the van etc, to be in operation), as they realised that mobile unit sessions were a valuable opportunity for parents to socialise with other adults and to have a break from their children. Teachers' responses on the extent to which they encouraged parents to become involved during sessions are recorded below.

> ***"Yes, we do encourage them but they are the parents' groups and they run them anyway."*** [YWCA MPSU]
>
> ***"We don't need to encourage them really because it's very rare not to get any help but we do make a point of thanking them in our newsletters for their support."*** [Franklin MPSU]
>
> ***"Yes...we have got quite a few mothers who really love being mother helps - they mightn't want to do things like cutting up pieces of material, they might prefer to really get involved with the activities which are happening on the tables which is really neat. I love to see parents who get involved. We did a week on cooking and the mothers just loved helping - they got right in there and sort of took over so we stood back and let them do it. It was really neat and the kids loved it too. We've got a couple of father helps who come along too and they get into the sandpit with the boys - I think boys can probably relate [better] to a similar sex when it comes to trucks and diggers and things like that so it's really good to have a man come along and work with the children....It can be a bit hard at times though with the parents [being present] because they have got their pre-kindergarten children - babies and toddlers - with them and they are often screaming in the background, racing around, throwing paint everywhere, breaking the [older] children's buildings down and you get a bit frustrated because some parents don't really look after their toddlers when they***

come [to sessions] and just let them run riot. You find yourself racing around after these little kids, pulling them off this, that and the other, before they hang themselves or something." [Franklin MPSU]

"When they first start they're given a newsletter of all the ways that they can help and we do ask them to [take their turn as] parent help...If they come and help and they don't want to work with the children that's up to them but if they do we're only too happy to have them work with the children however they want." [Clevedon MPSU]

"We don't seem to need to encourage them because they help anyway - with the unpacking and packing...Also, I think in a way it's lovely that parents can leave their children and go away because it's only a couple of times a week and I think it's healthy for the children to get a chance to be without their parents...I know you've got to encourage parents to be involved because you need them but personally I also think that kids need to be left alone to be without them and it's an awful lot easier for us to do our work if different mothers aren't hanging around 'cause the worst seems to come out in kids when Mum is hanging around." [Clevedon MPSU]

"We try really hard but a lot of parents just want time out. You will get one or two out of every group who really want to get in and work with the kids, other kids as well as their own, but the rest don't want to know. They want to talk to another adult, they don't want to talk to a child." [Thames MPSU]

"Yes, but only if they wish to." [Lakeland MPSU]

"Yes, we do encourage it as much as possible. Quite often parents will become involved and will sit down and chat to the children in the dolls' corner, read stories to the children. Not all of the mothers respond though, in lots of cases because the mothers are reasonably isolated and don't see other women regularly and are much happier to sit out in the kitchen for those two hours and have cups of tea and have a general discussion...It used to worry me that parents weren't involved but now I tend to let the parents do what they want to do, what they are more comfortable doing. Some of the women see it [mobile unit sessions] as having time out from their children." [Hunterville MPSU]

"Yes and no - we like the parents to be involved but we don't really mind most of the time if they are not because we understand that this is their time to come and have a natter with their neighbours." [Hunterville MPSU]

"Yes, we do. They just have to be involved because we just wouldn't be able to carry on if they didn't do a certain amount of work, especially the tidying up and the setting up. But we certainly don't mind them spending time talking amongst themselves as well." [Marlborough MPSU]

"Yes certainly, we encourage them lots but you only get a certain percentage that feel comfortable with some things and so that is fine - we are quite happy with that - whatever they are prepared to offer is valuable and for those that just come along purely to socialise and have time out, well that is important too." [Marlborough MPSU]

"We do encourage them if we can, but mainly just to look after their own little toddlers [whom we are not responsible for]." [Waimate MPSU]

"We encourage parents to get involved where it is needed and in other cases we encourage them to withdraw because the child needs to learn to do it on their own, particularly when they are getting close to five and they are still not doing anything on their own without mum coming along, so it works both ways." [Waimate MPSU]

"Yes and no. We do encourage them to be parent helpers, but often the room gets too crowded and noisy if a lot of parents stay. The children can be silly too if their parents stay so it's often better if the parents leave - except for, say, a new or very shy child who needs its mother to stay." [Southland MPSU]

The Ways in which Parents, According to Teachers, Generally Became Involved During Sessions

Teachers indicated, in response to the question 'In what ways do parents generally get involved in the sessions?', that this depended on people's skills, confidence and inclination and that it varied according to the nature and characteristics of particular groups. Most (apart from the YWCA groups where parents were responsible for running their own groups) said that parents primarily carried out housekeeping tasks[20] (preparing morning/afternoon tea, helping to unpack and pack the van, set out equipment at the beginning of the session, and tidying and cleaning up afterwards) and, to a lesser extent, worked with their own children from time to time. Parents at all groups where children too young to be 'officially' enrolled were permitted to attend were responsible for these children themselves, although the teachers said that parents sometimes forgot to tend them and had to be reminded. Parents frequently helped with general supervision and assisted children to put on aprons, place paper on the paint easel, and so on. Teachers felt that despite parents often viewing sessions as social times for themselves, they were always ready to help out if asked to do so. In the majority of instances, although the parents rostered for duty at a particular session carried out most of the necessary work, other parents also helped out at the beginning and end of each session with the major tasks of setting up and putting away. One or two teachers mentioned that some parents spent time observing at sessions in an attempt to learn new or different ways of interacting with their children.

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[20] Other research, eg Renwick (1989), has shown that this is a commonly occurring pattern amongst parents who help out in kindergartens and other early childhood organisations.

Finally, one teacher had this to say about the way in which parents may get involved during sessions:

> ***"[Those that do work with the children] actually get down on the floor and work with the kids, they will do puzzles, they will play memory games, they will do the matching games, they will read stories. It takes a bit of confidence, though, in themselves, so someone who is not confident will often just sit down with their own child. Often they then realise that two or three other children have crept up and are listening to the story too. If they can handle it, that's fine but if we see someone that is not handling it very well, we just go and grab a book and read it to the other ones to, you know, draw them away but most of the parents are okay about that sort of thing. They don't get too radical though - they won't go out and do singing or dancing. They are quite happy to leave that to us."***

The Ways in which Teachers Preferred Parents to be Involved During Sessions

When asked to comment on the ways in which they **preferred** parents to be involved [or not involved] in sessions teachers, in general, indicated that they preferred that parents carried out the 'housekeeping tasks' which were so important for the smooth running of the mobile units and which they would have found difficult, if not impossible, to handle themselves due to having to travel between groups. They also required parents to supervise their own toddlers and to sometimes carry out general supervision and 'caregiving' tasks related to children. Most teachers also liked parents to work at least a little bit with the children - reading stories, facilitating play, helping with, or initiating, a special activity - for the benefit of both the children and the parents. Teachers felt, however, that it was important for parents to be comfortable with that role and not to feel pressured - the teachers appreciated that not all parents felt confident about working with children and also that often, parents needed time for themselves without children. Finally, some teachers mentioned that there were occasions when they felt it was more appropriate for parents to withdraw and allow the children their own space and/or to allow the teachers to proceed without additional adult input which could, at times, be disruptive.

Teachers' Perceptions of the Role of Parents, Outside of Sessions

Teachers were asked to comment on how they saw the role of parents, outside of sessions, in relation to the mobile unit. The sorts of responses that teachers from each mobile unit made are detailed below.

YWCA: The teachers at this unit saw parents as being responsible for running their own sessions on days when the mobile unit did not visit their groups. Parents were not required to undertake fundraising activities, nor be members of a management committee; teachers, however, often invited parents to be involved in planning the camps that the unit ran each year. Teachers also saw parents as having responsibility for ongoing maintenance of the play areas which had been established at some venues and for following through at home with their children what they had learned at sessions. Finally, one teacher commented that: "Occasionally, we ask them to write letters of support for something we are trying to do in the community or within the department."

Franklin: Generally, teachers expected parents who were committee members to attend meetings, and that parents in general would take an interest in their children's 'homework books' by helping them complete tasks at home. Lastly, they depended upon parents to take some part in fundraising activities for the mobile unit.

Clevedon: Parents associated with this mobile unit were reported to do considerable fundraising, and to take responsibility for major cleaning and maintenance work at the various venues. The teachers commented:

> ***"They do all the fundraising - they don't enjoy it and find it a lot of hard work but they're great at it. They're good at cleaning up - they clean everything at the end of term and we send all sorts of stuff home to get washed...They'll fix anything that gets broken and also paint it if it is needed."***

> ***"They have an awful lot of responsibility in relation to the buildings I think. They [the buildings] are not our responsibility and we just sort of go away and leave it to the parents. They mow the lawns, mop the floors, sweep and clean. They also have a lot of meetings to do with fundraising but I think because they are a small community and know one another anyway they are more likely to have meetings and discuss things together than people, say, in the middle of a city. But they do have a lot of responsibility [outside of sessions].***

Thames: According to the teachers, outside of sessions, parents organised fundraising events, attended committee meetings, and maintained their buildings (three of the four groups visited by this unit owned their own buildings, erected entirely from proceeds of parents' fundraising activities) and outdoor play areas (at all four venues) - which again, had been established as a result of parents' efforts. The teachers commented, too, that the parents also organised social get togethers for themselves from time to time, to which they invited the teachers.

Lakeland: Parents took part in occasional fundraising activities (such activities were not undertaken by individual groups but were a joint effort by all five groups associated with the unit) and attended committee meetings.

Hunterville: Parents were reported to attend committee meetings, to undertake fundraising activities, to mow lawns and carry out general cleaning and maintenance work at their respective venues. They also assisted the teachers by passing on messages to other parents in their area thus saving the teachers a lot of telephoning; in addition, they kept the teachers informed about families who were absent from sessions (eg because of sickness), enabling teachers to keep in touch with those families.

Marlborough: Parents carried out a relatively small amount of fundraising, mainly for their own particular group, although one event was held each year to raise money for the mobile unit as a whole. Parents were also reported to attend committee meetings and to carry out maintenance work as required at their venues.

Waimate: The role of parents at this venue was to inform other people in the district about the mobile unit, attend committee meetings (the teachers reported that these were always very well attended), take part in working bees, and maintain, at home, their children's interest in what they had done or learned at sessions.

Southland: The teachers at this unit saw the parents' role as talking about kindergarten at home with their children - eg helping the children to learn and remember the teachers' names, discussing the theme for the following week (the teachers ensured that parents were informed of this in advance), and generally just reinforcing at home what they (the teachers) were trying to achieve with the children at sessions. The parents' role was also seen to include attending committee meetings, mowing lawns, and carrying out other cleaning and maintenance work at venues.

As can be seen, parents had a significant part to play in the overall running of the mobile pre-school units, not only during session times (when their major role was that of parent helps) but at other times as well. The teachers' perceptions of the parental role outside sessions as being primarily that of fundraising, cleaning and maintaining venues and, parent committee work (usually to discuss the two aforementioned topics), was similar to accounts given by respondents to the parent committee questionnaires (Chapter 5, Part III) on the major ways that parents contributed to the running and organisation of their mobile pre-school unit.

The Extent to which Parents Ran their Own Sessions on Days when the Mobile Unit Did Not Visit

Because the original concept of a mobile pre-school unit included the notion that parents would (with teacher assistance when required) run their own sessions on the days that the mobile pre-school unit was unable to attend their particular group (see Chapter 1), teachers were therefore specifically asked in the interview to comment on whether 'parents at each of the places you visit run sessions on the days when you don't visit?'

Of the nine mobile units, the YWCA was the only one where parents consistently ran their own sessions at times when the teachers were not present. The YWCA teachers stated that nine of their eleven groups ran such sessions, varying in frequency from four times a week to once a fortnight. The parent-organised sessions were reported to run on basically the same lines as those held when the mobile unit teachers were in attendance. Most groups owned their own equipment - eg they had basic supplies of paints and art materials, a selection of books and puzzles, plus a range of other items specific to the group. (The teachers commented that the availability of items to supplement the 'basics' depended to a large extent on storage space at the places where groups met, to group finances, and/or to parents' ability to realise that they could make good use of readily available materials - leaves, shells, boxes etc - and not have to spend money on expensive activities and equipment.) The YWCA mobile unit also operated a system whereby they loaned equipment to the different groups for a period of one month; at the end of the month the equipment was taken back and replaced with a further supply.

The teachers from the Clevedon, Lakeland, Hunterville, Waimate and Southland mobile pre-school units stated that none of their parent groups ran their own sessions, although one of the Southland groups was reported to have done so at one stage. (This had been at a time when there were a large number of 2-3 year olds in the district who were not yet eligible to attend the mobile unit; their mothers therefore ran a 'pre-entry' group until they were old enough to be enrolled at the mobile unit. While the group was in operation, the teachers had assisted the parents by providing ideas and lending some equipment.)

The teachers from the Franklin mobile pre-school unit reported that a parent in one of the communities that they served ran a pre-entry group once a week; although it met in the same place as the mobile unit and stored its equipment there, it ran quite independently.

One of the parent groups associated with the Thames mobile pre-school unit ran a creche and a music session - a total of two half days per week, while one of the Marlborough groups ran a fortnightly playgroup, plus a music group once a month.

Some of the teachers commented in the following ways on the issue of parents running additional sessions themselves:

> ***"Most of the parents live too far away from one another [to organise extra sessions]. Also, these women are really quite busy in the farming community itself, and on the farm. They can justify to their husbands coming to a kindergarten two hours a week when we are going to be there but I don't know how they would justify it [to them] for actually going and running a session themselves. (Some of the fathers aren't very interested in pre-school education - they seem to have the attitude that 'I didn't have any pre-school and I did all right without it so what does it matter.)"*** [Hunterville MPSU]

> ***"[If they did want to run their own sessions] a lot of the equipment is already there and most of the venues have got paint and things like that and if they haven't we would soon give it to them if they wanted to start their own sessions but nobody seems to be interested. We have spoken to them about it before. I think the parents should be running another session but what with their fundraising and all being very busy people bringing up families as well as working on their farms, they don't want to. And I don't know that I expect a lot more of them, the only thing that I would like them to do is try and carry out a lot of the things that they have seen and learned at kindergarten at home with their children."*** [Marlborough MPSU]

> ***"If the groups don't run their own sessions, well it's not for the want of asking and trying to set it up. [The other teacher] and I actually find this an area of frustration because we feel that sometimes perhaps they (the parents) see us in a leadership role and they can't quite manage to bridge that gap themselves when really, they've got all those abilities and it's just a lack of confidence. It's also making the time and sticking to it every week and trying to be confident enough to say 'Well, we're going to run a playgroup' and it's a matter of just having two or three people who are prepared to take the bull by the horns and do it. Because lots of them would like to do it but they haven't quite got to that stage where they believe they can. They're still in the thinking stage...Another factor is that when***

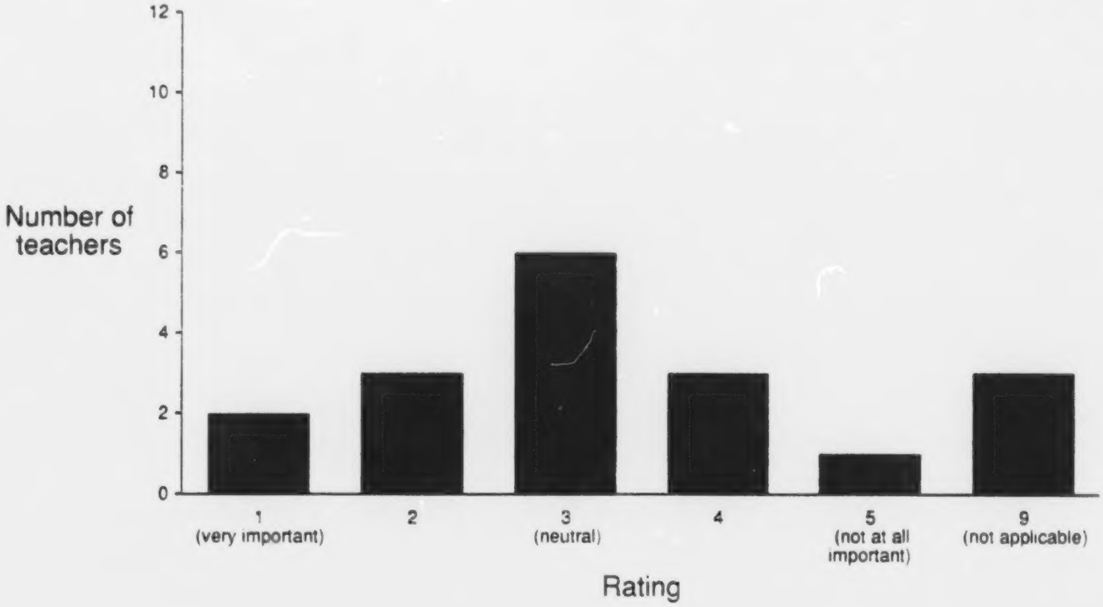
> ***we're there, they know we're 'running' it [the session] and there are no problems [disagreements] between parents wanting to do things in different ways], because they see us as 'being in charge'. Sometimes, there is a difficulty with venues because they are used by several other community groups and they might not have that venue available when they want it...[but] we'd love to see every group getting the most possible use out of their equipment and drawing from us for ideas but unfortunately this just doesn't happen."*** **[Marlborough MPSU]**

> ***"Some groups have [run their own sessions] in the past - two years ago there was a group run by the school teacher's wife. They also talked about running an extra session at Haka but that is as far as it has got. I think the main thing is time - a lot of these mothers are out on the farm and their children are out with them too. It is something they can do again if they want to and they know that."*** **[Waimate MPSU]**

The information presented above reveals that, contrary to the original concept of a mobile pre-school unit, and despite considerable dissatisfaction by both teachers and parents (see earlier this chapter, and Chapter 5) about the amount of pre-school education available to children attending mobile pre-school units, very few parent groups associated with mobile units ran additional sessions. This appeared to be for a number of reasons: parents being too busy with other commitments; families living too far apart from one another to make additional sessions a feasible proposition; lack of motivation/interest; lack of confidence on the part of parents, and feelings that as teachers are trained professionals this is best left to them; and, problems with suitable supplies of equipment and/or a place to meet.

In addition to the reasons given above (see also comments in Chapter 5 made by parent committees on why parents did not run additional sessions), there seems to be evidence to suggest that most of the teachers to whom we spoke did not necessarily place a high priority on this aspect of a mobile unit. For instance, when asked to rate on a five-point scale (ranging from '1 = Very important' to '5 = not at all important') how important they thought it was 'that parents run sessions on the days that the mobile unit does not visit' only five of the 18 teachers gave a rating of '1' or '2' (Figure 3.5). (Six chose the mid-point of the scale, four chose '4' or '5' while three considered that this was something which was not applicable to their situation.) In addition, only two teachers (Table 3.6) indicated that talking to parents about (running) their own sessions was a 'Very likely' or likely topic of conversation. Apart from the possibility that some teachers may have felt that running sessions was primarily **their** role and/or that it was **not** part of their role to get parents to do so, it is quite probable that a major reason that most teachers did not appear to go out of their way to promote parent-run sessions was simply due to lack of time.

Figure 3.5: Teachers' ratings of the importance of parents running their own sessions on the days that the mobile unit did not visit



Final Comments from Teachers about their Relationships with Parents in the Course of their Work

As a means of summing up teachers' feelings about parents, teachers were invited to add any comments that they wished about their relationships with parents generally. The following quotations seem to capture well the sorts of feelings that teachers expressed in response to previous questions, discussed above, on parents:

> ***"The main thing is that my relationship with parents is as a friend rather than a professional. I find it's the best way for me to work with this group of people. Trust is very important to me, warm close relationships and although I don't have difficulty with the people who don't want that kind of relationship, who want to maintain a separateness and who want to see me as a professional, it's the other [type of relationship] that I work hardest at because I can always be that other person [ie the 'professional'], but you need to work on the trust relationship. I have made friends with the women in the playgroups and to me that's a real plus. I was going to say I am quite proud of that, but it's more than that, to me, that's the unit working as it should be: it means I'm not emphasising differences between us, and that there are things that people in the playgroups find it easy to relate to and vice versa."*** **[YWCA MPSU]**

> ***"The parents are really great people and very vital to our role. We must always remember that they are important. I think, generally, we have a great time. It's pretty rare really that you have a niggly parent. Every now and then things come up, perhaps they might not agree with what we're doing with the children but I think if you've got an open mind and you try and talk situations like that through that is getting part way to an answer anyway, but it is definitely a situation of trying to please everybody but you certainly can't please all of them all of the time."*** [Marlborough MPSU]

PART IV : OTHER ASPECTS OF MOBILE PRE-SCHOOL UNITS AND THE ROLE OF THE MOBILE PRE-SCHOOL UNIT TEACHERS

This section contains discussion of: the extent to which mobile pre-school unit teachers liaised with other community and early childhood education workers; professional support networks for teachers; opportunities to meet with other mobile unit teachers; training needs; and, teachers' general comments about how well their mobile pre-school unit was operating, and the sorts of changes (if any) they would like to see made.

Practical Aspects of Running a Mobile Pre-School Unit (Including Administrative Responsibilities, Etc)

Information obtained from teachers during the interviews on the practical aspects of running a mobile pre-school unit, such as administrative responsibilities, maintenance and running of the vehicle, the characteristics of the various facilities available in which to run sessions, and the provision, storage and transportation of equipment, has been reported in the individual case studies, contained in Volume II of this report.

The Teachers' Role in the Community as Related to their Positions as Mobile Pre-School Unit Teachers

Teachers' responses to the question 'Does your position as mobile teacher in this community also involve you in other aspects of the parents'/children's lives (eg liaising with other groups such as social workers, district nurses, speech therapists and so on)?' revealed that most of the teachers did liaise with other community/health workers, as they saw fit, in the course of their work, although it was not always a simple matter for teachers to do so. Respondents described this particular aspect of their position as a mobile unit teacher in the following ways:

"Yes, liaising with other groups, definitely. We have ongoing networking with social workers, public health nurses, other pre-school people at kindergartens, playcentres. We have contact with Plunket, with dental nurses. We meet with community groups, community health groups, people from the city councils, primary schools and, well, we have a lot of meetings and some of them are with all of those people. But the other way that we are involved in other aspects of children's and parents' lives is through using the same facilities that they do - I mean, when I go into Henderson for lunch or go into Henderson Square for any reason, the number of people from our playgroups that you see is amazing - that's actually a really effective way of having contact with them within the community. We represent them, in a way, everytime I go and visit a headmaster on behalf of the playgroup, or everytime someone is having a real difficulty and I go and talk to someone at the Social Welfare that I know and see whether they can in fact do anything from their end that is having an influence on children's lives. So, yes, affecting the parents' lives affects the children's as far as I can see and that's what we are about." [YWCA MPSU]

"We don't tend to liaise directly with people such as speech therapists, Psych. Services ourselves, but we do refer individual children if the need arises. We would make the suggestion to the parents that they should see a speech therapist or whatever and leave it up to them. If the parents don't follow it up then we'd remind them again because we've seen a definite improvement in children who get help from those sorts of people." [Franklin MPSU]

"Not really, no. Just see the Plunket nurse occasionally and that's about it. If there was any problems we would liaise with other [professional] people such as speech therapists etc but there has never been anything that has required me to get involved." [Clevedon MPSU]

"Yes, we do liaise with all of those people. Some years you would spend very little time doing that and other years you would spend quite a bit, it just depends. The best thing [about liaising with others] is that once we have passed problems on it is in their department because we have no legal rights to go into people's homes or anything like that but a public health nurse can or a social welfare worker can. We are merely passers on of information - if you think a child is being battered or something like that, that is about all we can do in those sorts of situations." [Thames MPSU]

"We have had speech therapists come along to sessions. We haven't had to have any social workers up - as we see it at the moment there's no need for that." [Lakeland MPSU]

> *"Trying to get hold of these people is almost impossible because we are out on the road and not on hand in the kindergarten...and trying to get feedback from psychologists and the like is extremely difficult. They seem to regard us as not even being in existence because it is pretty difficult for them to get in touch with us...Because we cover such a wide area, we are dealing with three different public health nurses so that makes it even more difficult...We try and organise people to come along to sessions and talk to the group but it's always tricky - like we had been trying for about a month or six weeks to get hold of the traffic officer to come along and talk to the children but it was just a fluke that we managed to get her to come to our group the other day: and that was just because she happened to be at the school and she came along after she had finished there. Sometimes you just have to grab the opportunity when you can."* [Hunterville MPSU]

> *"Yes, we liaise with public health nurses, speech therapists, local school staff etc when necessary."* [Marlborough MPSU]

> *"Not a lot, just on a very small scale. But we do liaise with social workers or district nurses, speech therapists when necessary and they do come and visit in the different districts."* [Waimate MPSU]

> *"Yes, we liaise with public health nurses and speech therapists. They come to sessions on routine visits anyway. We mention to them first if we think a child needs to go to a psychologist or other professional person for outside help - just to get a second opinion."* [Southland MPSU]

Liaison with Other Early Childhood Education Groups/Workers

When asked if there were 'any other early childhood groups/workers (not counting the playgroups run by the parents at the places you visit), all teachers said that there were. They mentioned, for example, Nga Kohango Reo, playcentres, kindergartens, informal creches and daycare centres. One or two also mentioned community pre-school and REAP (Rural Education and Activities Programme) workers.

Few teachers were able to be very specific about the number (cr location, in some cases) of alternative early childhood education facilities in the **broad** geographical area served by their mobile unit, but teachers in general believed that most alternative facilities were not a feasible proposition for the majority of families which attended mobile unit sessions because of the distant location of many such facilities and the travelling, time and expense that would therefore be involved to get to them.

Several teachers also noted that although children from some groups were close enough to a town to attend an alternative pre-school facility, their parents preferred the mobile unit because there were no, or only very short, waiting lists, and children were able to attend at a younger age; they preferred the smaller numbers at mobile unit sessions over the larger group sizes common elsewhere; they felt that taking their child to sessions once or twice a week was as much as they could manage; and/or, they enjoyed having their children at home most days while still knowing that they were receiving some pre-school education.

The teachers were, however, aware that some mobile unit children - as discussed in Chapter 5 and in the individual case studies contained in Volume II - attended other early childhood education facilities from time to time as well. Although this usually involved considerable effort on the part of these children's parents, they were prepared to do so out of concern at the infrequency with which the mobile unit was able to visit their particular community each week. Several teachers acknowledged that while they knew that children were not technically allowed to participate in more than one type of government-funded early childhood education programme, they tended to 'turn a blind eye'. Like the parents, they were concerned that rural children were at a disadvantage when compared to their counterparts in towns and cities.

While some teachers reported that they occasionally liaised with other early childhood education workers in their area (eg a few mobile unit teachers frequently had lunch with teachers at the kindergartens which adjoined their office or base location, taking the opportunity to exchange ideas, experiences and, sometimes, items of equipment) in the course of their work, this seldom occurred in any formal, organised way, not in most cases from lack of interest[21] but because it was generally just too difficult to arrange, given the geographical isolation, travelling and time constraints associated with working on a mobile pre-school unit. As noted again later in the chapter, respondents would have especially valued more contact with other mobile pre-school unit teachers - ie the people whom they felt had the necessary insight and first-hand experience of what it is like to be a mobile pre-school unit teacher, to be able to offer truly helpful advice and support.

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[21] When asked to rate, on a scale ranging from '1 = Very important' to '5 = Not at all important, the importance of liaising with other early childhood education workers in their area, seven teachers gave a rating of '1', three a rating of '2', and one a rating of '3'. Of the remaining seven teachers, two in each case gave a rating of '4' or '5', while three replied that the item was not applicable because there were no other early childhood education workers in their vicinity.

Professional Support Networks for Mobile Pre-School Unit Teachers

Professional back up and support from their administrative bodies is clearly important for staff in any profession, but due to the often isolated nature of their work, it was thought that such support would be particularly important for mobile pre-school unit teachers. For this reason, the teachers whom we interviewed were asked to comment first, on what involvement their local kindergarten association (and/or YWCA branch in the case of the YWCA unit) had in the general running of their unit and second, how they felt about the nature and level of the kindergarten association's/YWCA's involvement.

In response to the first question, teachers variously reported that their local kindergarten association: administered their salaries, leave entitlements and provided information on their conditions of employment; provided them with senior teachers who gave "valuable" back up and support; participated in decisions about suitable venues in which to meet, changes in itinerary, and whether teachers should proceed with suggested plans to provide outings or special activities for their groups; handled the mobile unit's accounts; provided information on rules and regulations for kindergartens (including mobile pre-school units); organised area meetings for kindergarten teachers which they (the respondents) attended once a month; sometimes attended mobile unit committee meetings and, but much more rarely, sent a representative to observe sessions in progress; and, generally provided administrative back up and professional advice similar to that received by all kindergartens.

The extent to which the different kindergarten associations were reported by the teachers to have some input into the mobile units varied. One teacher commented that the kindergarten association was unable to have much involvement in her mobile unit "...because they are so far away" while another teacher felt that the amount of help received "...all depends on who is your president - it's all back to personalities isn't it?"

Teachers' responses in relation to the second question on how happy they were with the amount of involvement the kindergarten association had in the general running of their unit also varied[22]. A number of teachers (including some who felt that their kindergarten association did not, or could not, have a great deal of involvement) indicated that they were "very happy" or "satisfied' with the amount of involvement by their kindergarten association and/or that they found their local representatives to be "very helpful". One teacher remarked:

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[22] Refer also to Table 3.1 which shows that fewer than half (7) of the teachers rated their work as being generally well supplied professionally: the other teachers' ratings suggested there was room for improvement.

> ***"...they certainly back us up [but] I think perhaps some of the other associations aren't as supportive as ours is."***

Other teachers, however, were unhappy, chiefly because they felt that representatives of the kindergarten association "Don't really have much of an idea of the way we operate." As the quotations which follow exemplify, teachers felt that lack of first-hand knowledge of the working of a mobile unit, and making erroneous comparisons with 'standard' kindergartens, led to decisions which were not applicable to a mobile pre-school unit:

> ***"We feel very frustrated with the involvement of our association because they are in the city and they don't normally seem to understand, or they are ignorant of what goes on out here. We have invited lots of different people to come and visit on the van so they can get to know what it is like - the lack of time we get for shopping for equipment and just the way everything is so different that we can't say exactly what is going to happen each week because of the weather and road conditions and things like that. There are set guidelines for a kindergarten which we are supposed to adhere to but it just doesn't work out that way - like, for instance, if we turn up at a session and no one turns up we are required to wait there until the end of the session time which is a complete and utter waste of time. It's not like in a town kindergarten where a parent might just drop a child off and not wait, because here all the parents travel quite a distance and then stay with the children so they would never just leave a child without coming in [to the venue] too. Also, we have been told to make up any sessions that are missed like that but it's impossible to do that because of visiting the other groups and also it often doesn't suit parents to come on a different day...So things like that make it pretty frustrating at times but they [the kindergarten association] have started to realise now what we are going through and they are becoming more flexible - we are sort of allowed to make some decisions ourselves now, on what seems the best thing to do at the time."***

> ***"They tend to group us in with other kindergartens and I feel quite strongly that we can't be grouped with other kindergartens because we are not a standard kindergarten. We are very different. There are times when I get really frustrated and I wonder what the hell I am doing trying to argue with them."***

> *"I don't believe the kindergarten association should have so much involvement in the running of the mobile. All they should be is a back up for us - they should accept what the delegates [ie parents representing the mobile unit] have to say and what the teachers say. The delegates work really well with us and we look at it from the point of view that we are all trying to help the van as a total unit and I don't believe that a kindergarten association understands the nature of a mobile unit - they are not even kindergarten teachers."*

> *"They aren't aware of how we run and our special problems or concerns. They were unhelpful about finding alternative accommodation for our base when we needed it."*

Finally, as can be seen, the YWCA teachers felt that they were in a particularly difficult position:

> *"...I'm not actually happy at the moment with the way the YWCA is administering the unit and it is causing a lot of problems because they don't, in fact, have the support services to offer us what we need. We deal a lot with community work, community problems but we are not community counsellors. The YWCA could be giving us a lot more back up in that area, I think, by providing a community worker, perhaps 20 hours a week, who could work alongside us and who had time to follow up a lot of the cases that we are aware of but just can't manage to do...With the kindergarten association, because we are employed as kindergarten teachers that's actually a more natural place to us to turn for support so it's often quite frustrating when you turn there and you don't get help because they have other commitments and they have expected the YWCA to set up a support network for us. So, what happens is, you begin to think the association is slack, whereas I think they are not, they just feel they don't have to be concerned about what we are doing [because it's the YWCA's responsibility]. But that implies, as I said before, that the YWCA hasn't got their act together in that area and that puts a lot more stress on the staff to resolve difficulties for themselves and in an environment of getting very little feedback that quickly becomes very stressful so you begin to underachieve and become less effective. I often find myself in a position of doubt about what I am doing whereas, in fact, there isn't any need for that if I was getting good feedback."*

Other Professional Support and Assistance Available to Mobile Pre-School Unit Teachers

In addition to the questions which asked teachers about their working relationship with the kindergarten associations, teachers were asked what other groups or individuals they could go to for 'professional assistance or advice in connection with the planning and organisation of your programme?' Most replied that they could, if necessary, seek advice or support from senior teachers and/or District Officers - Early Childhood Education. Some respondents found their contact with these people very helpful while others, for various reasons (such as "a break down in communication"; distance; the senior teacher/District Officer being already over committed in her work to be very readily able to visit, especially given the mobile nature of the units; and, staff turnover, resulting in people who were not yet sufficiently familiar with the mobile unit to be of assistance), did not find requests for help or support to be satisfactory.

Teachers mentioned, however, that they were sometimes (or often) able to receive help from one or more of the following: the other teacher with whom they worked; teachers from standard kindergartens (especially relevant for the mobile unit teachers whose office or base location adjoined such kindergartens); a KTA (Kindergarten Teachers Association) counsellor; the Women's Resources Officer at the YWCA; and, the kindergarten teachers' support group. Two teachers specifically mentioned that they had found support received from parents on the mobile unit's management committee to be particularly valuable, while one teacher mentioned that she had received helpful advice and guidance from Psychological Services when planning a programme for a particular child.

Despite the apparent availability of professional back up and support, at least in theory, most of the mobile unit teachers seemed to feel a need for more, and that it would be particularly helpful to be able to liaise with people who were more closely informed about mobile pre-school units - as discussed in the section which follows, teachers were greatly in favour of having regular contact with teachers from other mobile pre-school units.

Opportunities to Meet with Other Mobile Pre-School Unit Teachers

Only the teachers from the Clevedon and Franklin units (which are in relatively close proximity) said that they had the opportunity to meet with other mobile pre-school unit teachers (they were able to meet each other at the monthly meetings held for all kindergarten teachers in the general area) but even they said that, because of all the travelling involved in their work, it was almost impossible to meet outside of these meetings to share experiences of being mobile pre-school unit teachers. (The general meetings allowed very little opportunity for them to talk specifically about mobile units.)

None of the other teachers had had any recent contact with their mobile unit colleagues, although as one teacher put it "I would desperately like to." The teachers felt that, as working on a mobile unit was such a "different" experience, other mobile unit teachers were the ones who would best understand the unique problems and advantages, and who would be likely to have the most helpful suggestions about adapting activities and equipment (etc, etc) specifically for the mobile situation. All respondents stated that they would, therefore, like to have the Department of Education/kindergarten associations/KTA organise regular (once or twice a year) conferences for mobile unit teachers - preferably during term time - at some reasonably central location.

Induction/Further Training of Mobile Pre-School Unit Teachers

Induction

As a follow up to the issue of professional support and guidance for teachers, and as part of a broad consideration of desirable background experience, and further training, for mobile unit staff, the interviewees were asked to describe what (if any) induction or training they had received for working on a mobile pre-school unit.

None of the teachers had received any formal induction or training (not even when there had been a situation of the head teacher and teacher both being new appointees, starting out together) for their job on a mobile unit. 'Induction', therefore, had been a matter of learning as they went. In two instances, the teachers noted that their colleague had been so patient and helpful that 'learning as they went' had not posed any particular problems and they were not generally dissatisfied with their lack of induction. In one or two other cases, the teachers concerned seemed to feel that although some guidelines would have been helpful, they felt it was just a matter of getting on and being resourceful enough to find out for themselves, for example:

> *"I relieved on the mobile off and on during 1986 so I knew basically what I was applying for. But [when I started as head teacher] I wasn't given anything [ie no induction training or guidelines] so I just - typical Kiwi, you just get on and do it, don't you? I arrived and looked at that list there [ie the itinerary pinned up on the wall] and found out where I was meant to be going and took off! The other teacher was new too so we both walked in here green as grass. We were thrown in the deep end together but we survived!"*

The majority (14) of teachers, however, were less than satisfied with their lack of induction, for instance:

> *"When you join a mobile unit you either sink or swim but that doesn't mean that it is a good system. I think that the KTA should look at getting the mobile teachers together and I think the Department [of Education], maybe, should pay for the mobile teachers to have some time together because although we are all different [ie the mobile units] there are things we could do on a common basis and just share ideas and problems. I think we should get together, there should be training for us all, some time off together. I think there are lots of things we could learn from each other."*

> *"I was sent out two days on the van to observe and that was it...I will admit it took a while to get used to it; I still get caught on the hop occasionally as to what is the right thing to say or do."*

> *"No, I am not satisfied with my induction. There are lots of things that would have helped me - it would have really helped to have somebody from the YWCA give me details and work through with me the YWCA system; it would have helped to have a briefing on the philosophy of the unit, expectations of the YWCA. In fact, I would have really liked to have had a team of people who had worked on this unit spending a bit of time with me. I would have liked to have had visits from, not really inspectoral visits, but supervisory visits from somebody, whether from the YWCA or kindergarten association [it wouldn't matter] looking at the way I worked and giving me some feedback on it. I would have actually liked to have had some formal training, rather than just on-the-job training, eg stress management would have been a really useful skill to have learned right in the beginning. some training in dealing with large numbers of people, and all the changeability that goes on would certainly have helped."*

Background and Training

Earlier in the chapter (p.50), desirable qualities to look for when appointing teachers to a mobile pre-school unit position were outlined. Teachers again reiterated these, and other, desirable characteristics for mobile pre-school unit teachers when referring to additional training and/or experience they would liked to have had when beginning their job and/or would like to gain in the future. One of the teachers stated, for example:

> ***"I think that because you work so much more closely with the parents that anybody who takes on the mobile unit has to know how to deal with them [the parents]. It helps as you get older - you learn to cope with anybody and everybody. As a first, second year teacher I wasn't nearly as confident as I am now, I would never say boo to a goose...I think that because it is such a different way of life on the mobile unit, compared to a conventional kindergarten, that you just have to have some understanding of that - some people in the past didn't know what they were getting themselves into and couldn't cope."***

Another teacher commented in a similar vein:

> ***"You have to be able to have an outlook of not worrying too much on a mobile unit - you have to make the most of what is available and leave it at that. It's a hard job for young people... Anyone who takes on the job should have done a defensive driving course - that's most important. They should also spend a week on a mobile so they know what's involved and there should be a special course for teachers before they start...Mobile teachers need to learn about toddlers and be able to accept and cope with them. They also need to learn to get along with parents and understand their problems. Often, well usually, it's an older person's job [rather than a recent graduate's], I feel. You can't be too soft either."***

More specifically, desirable skills and/or experiences that the interviewees felt mobile pre-school unit teachers should possess, included: being friendly, approachable and non-judgemental; having good communication skills; being flexible and resourceful; being a mother, which improves credibility with (some) parents, and promotes awareness and understanding of parents' problems or concerns; and, general "life experience".

Desirable additional training for mobile pre-school teachers was reported to include courses for acquiring skills or knowledge related to counselling, resources, administration, Maori and Pacific Island Languages, babies and toddlers; and courses to promote personal development and the ability to interact effectively with others (eg courses on self-esteem, group dynamics and assertiveness training). Finally, respondents advocated a course specifically for mobile pre-school unit teachers, which would enable participants to interact and trade problems and successes.

Teachers' Views on Mobile Pre-School Units 'Now' and in the Future

As a way of obtaining some information, albeit informal, on the continuing need for a mobile pre-school unit in the areas which they were serving at the time the fieldwork for this study was carried out, teachers were asked: 'Are there any particular trends or influences in the area which you think could have an important or major effect on [your] mobile unit in the future (eg urban drift, the closing down/establishment of an industry in the area, fewer/more young people living in the area and so on) and/or have there been any particular trends recently which have affected the mobile unit this year [1988]?'

Teachers from the Franklin, Clevedon, and Thames mobile pre-school units all indicated that the communities which they served were expanding: an increasing number of (young) people were choosing to adopt a 'rural lifestyle' while continuing to commute into Auckland for work. The teachers felt that this would lead to an even greater demand for the services of the mobile pre-school units in the future, although in the case of the Franklin and Thames units, changes in itinerary were also imminent due to two groups (one from each unit) seeking, with every chance of success, full-time, permanent kindergarten status. (The Clevedon teachers mentioned, too, that an increasing number of women going into paid employment could affect the mobile unit in that there would be fewer parents available to help out at the unit, leaving more work for the teachers and other parents.)

The Marlborough teachers noted that although the rural downturn had affected communities due to farmers/farm workers leaving properties which were no longer viable, other people, often families with young children, were moving away from towns and cities and into country areas, buying land cheaply. On balance, therefore, they felt that the need for the services of the mobile pre-school unit would continue unaffected. Teachers from the Hunterville, Waimate and Southland units expressed similar opinions.

In general, as the quotations which follow illustrate, teachers seemed to feel that any changes, either in the communities that they were presently serving, or in nearby ones (accessible to the mobile unit), would be more likely to mean a continuing, if not an increased, need for the services of a mobile unit, rather than a decreased need.

> ***"The most obvious thing that affects the unit is the economic situation in the country - with fewer single income families [ie because women have to work to supplement the***

> *family income] it means that there are fewer people who are able to use our groups. That would be a major influence that I see affecting attendance. [This possible drop in attendance would be offset, though, by] the other thing that is happening in West Auckland: there are still huge pockets, increasingly so, of the low cost, high density, houses that have been put up and there are a lot of kids out there who aren't getting any pre-school, particularly with Pacific Islanders who are moving into the new housing in a big way. The children are often left at home with old grandparents - like we know of one case at the moment who is a classic example of a woman who shouldn't be left at home with three children - she is going blind, she is very old, very frail, she doesn't speak any English at all but because the money is needed to pay for the house [both parents go out to work] then that's the only option for that family. So there are a lot of kids out there who are quite isolated from the rest of the world. We work really hard to reach as many as we can...So a major problem, I think, and one that is going to increase, is there will be all those old people out in the suburbs with pre-schoolers to look after and because of their own physical limits, and cultural adjustment, the children don't get a very broad range of experiences. The unit could have a really big impact in areas like that although we couldn't at the moment because we are understaffed and underfunded. I guess in the future, something which may affect our work is if more childcare facilities were built in the area - it's certainly childcare facilities that we need out West."*

> *"What may pose a problem is if farming continues the way it is. We are already getting a bit of feedback from it now - people can't afford to employ farm workers [who often have young children] and the wives tend to do a lot more of the work so you haven't got the same number of people in the rural area - but in the longer term I don't really think there will be much affect on the mobile - there will still be plenty of need for it."*

Teachers' Views on the Way in which their Mobile Units were Operating

As a final summing up of their overall attitude to their particular mobile pre-school unit, teachers were invited to give their '...views on the way this mobile unit is run at present' and, 'Do you think there should be changes in the way the unit is structured/organised?' The resulting responses are presented below.

> *"I think we should have a new vehicle so that we don't have so much lifting and carrying from sheds and so we could actually store things in a van. I would also like a bigger vehicle so that we can do something about outdoor play, carry more outdoor equipment. I'm not convinced that the YWCA is the agency to be supporting us. They don't have their own philosophies clear which means that they are not able to offer us the back up we need. I'm*

not sure who I think should take it over but whoever it is needs to be compatible with the community focus that we have had rather than child focused and there also needs to be a better training system for working on the unit - induction type training and ongoing training as well because things change all the time. It's not enough to rely on personal characteristics of the staff without offering anything back and that is what I see has been happening. I would like to have fewer groups to work with or have more staff, which would involve a lot more money because we would need another vehicle. It would be unrealistic to have more staff with only one car. In some cases I would like to be able to bus children to a central area which is what we are not able to do at the moment. There are a lot of children, especially Pacific Island children, who I think are missing out on pre-schooling in West Auckland and I would like to be able to bus them, perhaps to a church run playgroup, in a different area if they don't have one locally. There are a lot of very strong church groups in the West [Auckland area] and I think there'd be a better success rate of getting these children some pre-school using a system like that - because family and church links are very important to them. At present we don't get as many Pacific Island children and parents along to our groups as we'd like....It would also be valuable to have a childcare worker employed whose responsibility was to run a creche facility while we were doing the parent run workshops or just having parent meetings (without the children present). It doesn't work very well to ask for volunteers [to look after the children] when you want to do something specifically with the parents. It also doesn't work to have things in the evenings because that is a difficult time for parents to get away and it's really frustrating and stressful to try and run anything during the day with the children there - the parents' attention is interrupted all the time." [YWCA MPSU]

"At the moment, we are working on defining people's objectives and roles and then to improve on the philosophy of the mobile unit - to meet now-a-days needs, and the continuing changes that occur. Mainly, we're trying to define the roles of the association and the Education Department." [YWCA MPSU]

"I think we as teachers have got the mobile running pretty well at present. In fact, we have had lots of parents who have complimented us on our brilliant work this year and how things are going so that's really good to get that feedback from parents." [Franklin MPSU]

"It seems to be running quite well. You can't change something just to suit individual teachers anyway because there's quite a high turnover of teachers so things have to remain fairly constant to suit the families 'cause they're there for longer than the teachers." [Clevedon MPSU]

"I would like to change what we carry around in the van with us. Apart from supplies of paints, dough, glue - all the expendable stuff - I would like just to carry special equipment (that tends to be expensive) - like special construction sets that cost four or five hundred dollars - and equipment for outdoor play (eg a quadro) that the groups don't have (and couldn't afford) themselves and leave the rest of the equipment to the individual groups - because they all have their own buildings and supplies. We could also have things like puzzles and books which we would rotate around the different groups on a loan system - it's important to keep the variety going." [Thames MPSU]

"I would like to see us do more programme planning and would like to see mat-times at the groups." [Thames MPSU]

"Great, except for the change in our itinerary timetable [the kindergarten association asked us to make]. But they see our point now and it will change back to what it was so everything will be fine when we get back to normality. I think it's pretty well organised really. It would certainly help to have some lighter equipment designed for the mobile situation to save us humping all that heavy stuff in and out of the van but despite that I love it, the variety, and wouldn't want to go back to a 40/40 [kindergarten]. A bigger van would help too!" [Lakeland MPSU]

"I haven't got a lot to compare it with but I think the way we run it is good and the parents are happy. But it would be interesting to see other mobile units just to compare." [Lakeland MPSU]

"I think, basically, it is going really well. The only changes I would like to see would be that we are given a certain amount more flexibility [by the kindergarten association] as far as administration and our itinerary goes...I would like to emphasise that the mobile unit is really incredibly important to these parents and kids, otherwise they would probably get absolutely no pre-school education at all." [Hunterville MPSU]

"I think the way it is being run at present, the timetable and everything, is working really well. Apparently it used to be really chaotic, with travelling way out to one group and then double tracking back to another but then they rearranged the itinerary so everything fitted in better...One thing I would like to mention as far as staff conditions go is that I feel a place like Hunterville should be classed as an incentive area, that there should be more money. There really isn't an incentive for people to stay in Hunterville (unless they are married to someone here), unless you get cheap rent. So there will always be a high turnover of staff [to the detriment of the mobile unit]." [Hunterville MPSU]

"I think that we should be a little less under the kindergarten association but then I have always felt that kindergarten associations have too much input into how a kindergarten should be organised without taking into account that there are trained people who are able, more than able to organise themselves...I would like a lot more flexibility so that we can decide if a place [group] should be closed down and another one started ([eg] we have a very small group and it seems a waste of money to keep going there when other places have a greater need and those children could join one of our other groups)...I would like to see lots and lots of equipment. I think the van [mobile unit] should have as much equipment as the town kindergartens. I do think that we should have much better professional support just for mobile teachers. A lot of the teachers might find it really difficult and they haven't got anyone to talk to about their problems and that makes life difficult. So I would like to see some sort of course just for mobile teachers because I am sure that the other teachers have other ways of dealing with things and it would be nice to exchange ideas."
[Marlborough MPSU]

"The biggest change that I would like to see is that we must be allowed to be flexible on where we go. The only fair way to decide where to go is to base that on numbers, the total numbers attending. Being allowed to be flexible is a really big trust because then you are meeting those needs so directly you are not waiting for a decision to be made in two years time. I am really happy about everything else that happens, the way it is run, and the District Officers and everyone like that are really supportive. The only thing would be getting better liaison with the association and perhaps, on a personal level, something more for mobile teachers in the way of refresher courses or a time when we can get together and put our heads together about our differences and specific needs. But really, I wish there were more mobile units to cover these children who have very real needs."
[Marlborough MPSU]

"The only thing that perhaps could be changed would be the ratio of the parents to children. As long as parents of the under two-and-a-half year olds stayed to look after their children I sometimes feel we have too many parents stay - it makes it difficult to work when it is crowded and noisy. I would be happier, say, with a 1 to 5 ratio, or something like that."
[Waimate MPSU]

"Basically, everything is fine although personally I would be happy to go on for longer in the afternoons so that the afternoon sessions are the same length as the morning ones. It always seems such a rush in the afternoons. But it isn't actually feasible because parents have to get back to meet children off school buses and things like that but it would be nice

> ***if the groups could all have the same length of session. It would be nice to perhaps have a bigger van so that we could carry more."*** **[Waimate MPSU]**
>
> ***"I would like other [early childhood] people to be more aware of what the mobile unit is about so it's not just the teachers who know. I would like there to be more flexibility for deciding which areas to go to, when to close groups and things like that."*** **[Southland MPSU]**
>
> ***"I can't imagine there being any changes that would make it better. I think it's very successful - it fulfils great needs."*** **[Southland MPSU]**

Although most teachers mentioned changes that they would like made, few of these involved major structural changes (with the exception, perhaps, of the YWCA unit), and overall, taking into the account the limitations imposed by the itinerant nature of mobile pre-school units, they seemed generally satisfied with the ways in which their particular mobile units were operating.

PART V : SUMMARY

By making extensive use of quotations from the interviews which were conducted, this chapter has focused on the mobile pre-school units from the perspective of the teachers. The teachers' descriptions of their work have provided a substantial insight into what it is like to work as a mobile pre-school unit teacher; they have also highlighted the similarities and differences between the mobile units, something which is elaborated upon in the individual case studies contained in Volume II of this report.

Major findings, as presented in the chapter, are summarised below.

- Overall job satisfaction amongst the teachers was high, despite certain difficulties associated with their work. (Difficulties mentioned included having too little time to develop and extend programmes, to follow up on individual children, and to provide parent education; having to cope with a wide age range of children within the same group; coping with the crowded and noisy conditions which resulted from having large numbers of parents present as well as children; not being able to carry enough equipment with them to allow for spontaneity, and so on.)

- Best liked aspects of their work were cited to include the ample opportunities to work one-to-one with children and/or with small groups (which respondents felt greatly compensated for the infrequency with which mobile units were able to visit groups); the variety, stimulation and excitement; and the 'family-feeling' that resulted from parents, babies and toddlers remaining throughout sessions.

- Teachers felt that, for the most part, mobile pre-school units were able to offer 'good learning experiences' for children, despite the limitations imposed by the itinerant nature of the units. Teachers were aware that, for children who were isolated (either geographically, or in the case of the urban YWCA unit, by a variety of other circumstances) it was particularly important for them to develop social skills (by having the opportunity to interact with their peers and with adults outside their own family) and to develop quality language. These were the major areas that teachers worked on in their interactions with children, although the development of independence and creativity were also seen to be important focus areas.

- Respondents felt that it was critical for staff on a mobile pre-school unit to get on well together, given the close proximity with which they had to work, the constant scrutiny of parents, and the fact that, not only did they have to work together during sessions, but they also had to spend considerable time in the van travelling to and from groups.

- Respondents indicated that mobile unit teachers needed to be flexible, resourceful, and able to relate well to diverse groups of parents and children.

- Teachers felt that they generally had very positive interactions with parents (many of whom they got to know well because parents frequently remained throughout sessions). They felt their role with parents was a combination of friend, adviser, and confidante, as well as that of a professional.

- Teacher placed almost as high a priority (or, in the case of the YWCA unit, even higher priority) on parents, as well as children, 'benefiting on a personal level' from their association with a mobile pre-school unit.

- Teachers reported that parents generally gave a great deal of support to the mobile pre-school units without which the units would run much less smoothly. Usually, however, parents' contributions were in the area of 'housekeeping' tasks during sessions (plus fundraising activities and maintenance of venues outside of sessions) rather than working with the children (not counting general supervision and some 'caregiving of children'). Although most teachers would have liked parents to interact more with the children (one or two felt that it was sometimes more appropriate for parents to withdraw and give children their own space) they also appreciated that parents needed time out from their children and that mobile unit sessions were a valid - and much needed - means of enabling (often geographically isolated) parents to interact with other adults. They therefore did not like to put pressure on parents to work with children - apart from the requirement at most mobile units that parents took responsibility for supervising any of their own children not yet old enough to be enrolled (usually those younger than two-and-a-half to three years).

- Few parent groups (other than those associated with the YWCA unit) ran their own sessions on the days that the mobile unit did not visit their area. Despite both teachers and parents being unhappy about the amount of pre-school education that children were able to receive each week from a mobile unit, neither party seemed to place a particularly high priority on organising additional sessions (although other factors such as the distance and travel involved, lack of equipment and a suitable place to meet, also played a part in this state of affairs).

- Overall, teachers seemed to feel that they would like more professional back up and support in their work - or, at least, to be able to feel that their administrative bodies were more informed about the specific and individualistic nature of work on a mobile pre-school unit and that they understood that it was inappropriate to compare working on a mobile with working at a standard kindergarten in a town or city.

- Most teachers were keen to see improved induction procedures for new appointees to mobile units, and all felt that it was vital to have the opportunity - once or twice a year - to meet with other mobile pre-school unit teachers.

- Finally, although teachers generally felt that the mobile units were working well, there were a variety of changes that they would like to see to enable them to improve on the service they were currently offering their particular communities.

CHAPTER FOUR : THE NATURE AND EXTENT OF INTERACTIONS BETWEEN TEACHERS AND CHILDREN, AND TEACHERS AND PARENTS, IN MOBILE PRE-SCHOOL UNITS

Introduction

In addition to information gained - by means of the teacher interviews and through relatively informal observations - on the particular working philosophies and features of each of the mobile pre-school units (the details of which are presented in Chapter 3 and in the individual case studies contained in Volume II of this report), systematic observations of interactions between teachers and children, and teachers and parents, in the natural setting allowed us to gain a greater insight into the nature of the social, emotional, and learning environment provided at mobile pre-school unit sessions. Bronfenbrenner (1979), for example, a major influence on research in human development in recent years, advocates the importance of studying children and their 'significant others' (eg caregivers, teachers) in the natural social contexts in which they live. He has criticised much prior research because it was conducted in atypical situations. He characterises such research as the "study of *development-out-of context*" (p.21) which, he claims, makes it largely invalid for decision-making purposes. He therefore states that:

> **"The ecology of human development involves the scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodation between an active, growing human being and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives, as this process is affected by relations between these settings, and by the larger contexts in which the settings are embedded."** (p.21)

Bronfenbrenner defines 'setting' as a "place where people can readily engage in face-to-face interaction - home, day care center, playground, and so on." (p.22). He stresses the importance of studying "the pattern of activities, roles and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics." (p.22)

Although, as explained in Chapter 2, it was not possible to formally observe **children** in the present study, it seemed appropriate to formally observe teachers (ie, because they are recognised as 'significant others' in children's lives) as a way of commenting on the social and learning environment provided for children by mobile pre-school units.

Individual teachers were observed for between 3 hours, and 5 hours 10 minutes, or a total of 75 hours 40 minutes observation time for all 18 teachers. Table 4.1 shows the length of time spent observing teachers at each mobile pre-school unit.

During sessions, the two teachers present were observed alternately for a period of five minutes at a time (divided into intervals of 10 seconds for observing and 5 seconds for recording); the order in which the teachers were initially observed at each session was also alternated to avoid a situation where a particular teacher might always be shown engaged in behaviours more typical at the beginning - or end - of a session (eg caregiving of the environment).

The teachers were observed using 24 categories of precoded behaviours. The categories of behaviour are listed, together with their definitions, in Chapter 2 (Table 2.1, page 22). Chapter 2 also gives a more detailed account of how the observations were carried out.

Table 4.1: The amount of time spent systematically observing teachers at each mobile pre-school unit

Mobile unit	Time spent observing each teacher[a]		Total time at each unit
	Head teacher	Second teacher	
YWCA	3 hours	3 hrs 10 mins	6 hrs 10 mins
Franklin	3 hrs 40 mins	3 hrs 59 mins	7 hrs 39 mins
Clevedon	3 hrs 5 mins	3 hours	6 hrs 5 mins
Thames	4 hrs 55 mins	5 hours	9 hrs 55 mins
Lakeland	4 hrs 10 mins	4 hrs 25 mins	8 hrs 35 mins
Hunterville	4 hrs 20 mins	4 hrs 28 mins	8 hrs 28 mins
Marlborough	5 hrs 10 mins	4 hrs 50 mins	10 hours
Waimate	4 hrs 25 mins	4 hrs 35 mins	9 hours
Southland	5 hrs 5 mins	4 hrs 42 mins	9 hrs 47 mins

[a] Sometimes special events such as organised outings, or other circumstances (eg teachers being on sick leave at the Lakeland mobile pre-school unit) prevented the researchers from obtaining as much observation time on individual teachers as initially planned.

Although it has already been stated earlier in this report (Chapter 2), it should again be noted that the purpose of the observations was **not** to assess the performance of individual teachers but, rather, they were a way of obtaining as objectively as possible data on what happens in the natural setting of mobile pre-school units. In subsequent sections of this chapter, the data from the teacher observations are discussed in light of the different characteristics of the various mobile pre-school units, rather than in terms of 'teacher style' per se, although teaching style and other individual teacher characteristics must - to some extent - necessarily be an important factor in differences between mobile units.

PART I : AN OVERVIEW OF THE OBSERVATION FINDINGS

The data yielded by the teacher observations revealed major trends in the ways that mobile pre-school unit teachers spent their time, during sessions, with children, parents, visitors and with the other teachers with whom they worked: ie it can be seen which types of activities (the **context** in which various categories of behaviours occurred) and interactive behaviours were apportioned the most amount of time, and those which were allocated lesser amounts. Table 4.2 and the corresponding graph, Figure 4.1, give a global picture - based on all 18 teachers - of the major trends in behaviour. (Tables 4.8 to 4.16 and Figures 4.11 to 4.28 at the end of this chapter portray the results for individual teachers.)

The following section contains discussion of the major activities that teachers engaged in, and gives a brief outline of the ways in which teachers mainly interacted with children, parents, and others. Some of the more major or interesting variations in teacher behaviours observed at the different mobile units are then singled out for further discussion. Such discussion is included in Parts II (relating to teachers' interactions with children) and III (teachers' interactions with parents) of this chapter.

The Major Activities that Teachers Engaged in During Observed Intervals

For each observed interval, as well as the specific behaviours which comprised teachers' interactions with children, parents, and others, the major activity (or context in which interactions took place) engaged in by the teacher was also recorded. (Only one activity was recorded for each interval: the one that either predominated or took up the entire interval.) The relative times that teachers spent on each activity are discussed below.

Facilitating Play

Mobile pre-school unit teachers spent the greatest percentage of observed intervals (a mean of 52.5% of intervals, Figure 4.1) on facilitating play with children ie working with small groups of children either actively helping or encouraging them in what they were doing or, just by being close-by, showing the children that they were interested and ready to help, even if not physically taking part. Smith and Haggerty (1979) cite research which has shown that when teachers facilitate play this has an important positive effect on stimulating children's learning and language development, stimulation which does not occur - at least not to the same extent - simply by providing activities for children.

Variations in the amount of time that different teachers spent on facilitating play seemed to be a function of how much time they spent talking exclusively to parents and leading a group activity. Teachers from the Marlborough mobile pre-school unit, for example, spent least time, of all the teachers who were observed, on facilitating play (around about a third of their time - see Tables 4.20 and 4.21). This seems to be because they spent a large proportion of their time - around 25% of all observed intervals - interacting with parents. They spent close to the average time (Table 4.2) on both caregiving of the environment and leading a group activity.

It is of interest to note here that some research - eg Clift (cited by Meade, 1985) - has suggested that when there are more adults present, thus increasing the ratio of adults to children, teachers can become **less** involved with the children, spending more time talking to other adults or becoming more involved in housekeeping tasks. Present data seem to suggest a trend towards the former (ie an increased level of interaction with parents) in the case of some teachers.

As for the Marlborough teachers, the Waimate and Southland mobile pre-school unit teachers also spent less than half of their time on facilitating play (between 41% and 48%), probably because a significant portion of the programmes that they ran involved large group activity. These teachers spent between one-fifth and almost one-third of their time during sessions in leading a large group activity.

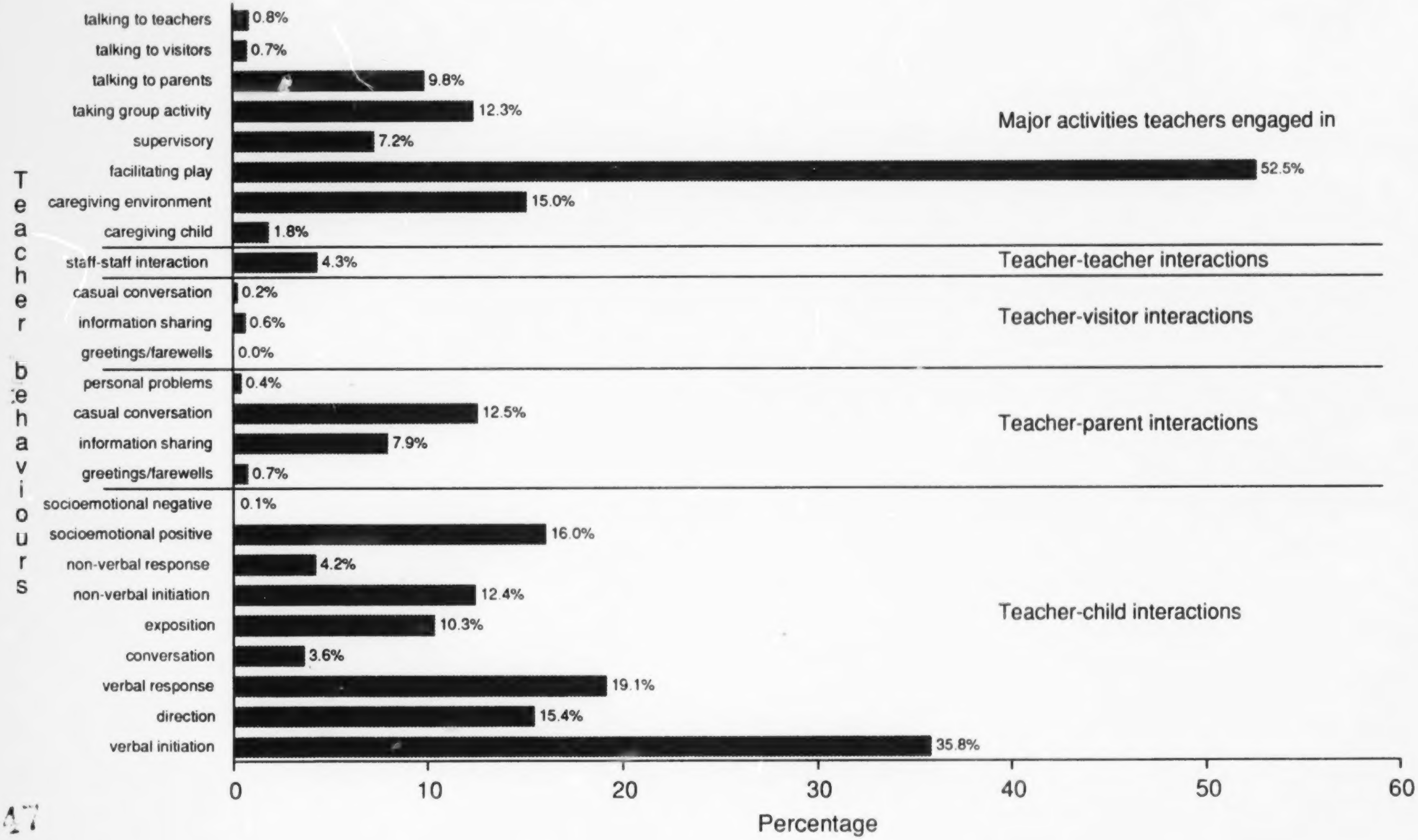
Despite variations between teachers, data indicate that working and interacting with small rather than large groups of children was a major focus of all teachers during mobile pre-school unit sessions.

Table 4.2: Percentage of total observed intervals for all 18 teachers in which various precoded teacher behaviours/activities occurred

Behaviour	Mean (x) percentage of observed intervals %	Median percentage of observed intervals %	Range[a] %
Teacher-Child Interactions			
Verbal initiation	35.8	34.8	21.9 - 50.8
Direction	15.4	14.3	6.3 - 29.8
Verbal response	19.1	18.3	11.2 - 32.5
Conversation	3.6	4.3	0.5 - 6.6
Exposition	10.3	10.3	3.7 - 19.3
Non-verbal initiation	12.4	7.4	3.0 - 28.1
Non-verbal response	4.2	4.0	1.7 - 7.6
Socioemotional positive	16.0	16.7	4.9 - 35.0
Socioemotional negative	0.1	0	0 - 0.3
Teacher-parent Interactions			
Greetings/Farewells	0.7	0.7	0 - 1.6
Information sharing	7.9	6.0	0.7 - 27.1
Casual conversation	12.5	11.0	1.4 - 33.2
Personal problems	0.4	0	0 - 2.6
Teacher-Visitor Interactions			
Greetings/Farewells	0.01	0	0 - 0.1
Information sharing	0.6	0	0 - 4.7
Casual conversation	0.2	0	0 - 1.4
Teacher-Teacher Interactions	4.3	4.5	1.6 - 8.5
Activity			
Caregiving child	1.8	1.8	0.2 - 4.5
Caregiving environment	15.0	16.0	4.5 - 25.3
Facilitating play	52.5	54.2	32.4 - 69.5
Supervisory	7.2	7.2	1.8 - 11.9
Leading a group activity	12.3	11.3	1.4 - 31.4
Talking to parents	9.8	8.0	1.0 - 25.6
Talking to visitors	0.7	0	0 - 4.4
Talking to teachers	0.8	0.8	0 - 1.7

[a] Range: the upper and lower limits of the proportion of observed intervals that individual teachers spent on each behaviour/activity.

Figure 4.1: Percentage of total observed intervals for all 18 teachers in which various precoded teacher behaviours/activities occurred



Leading a Large Group Activity

The variation in the amount of time teachers spent in leading a large group activity is shown in Figure 4.2.

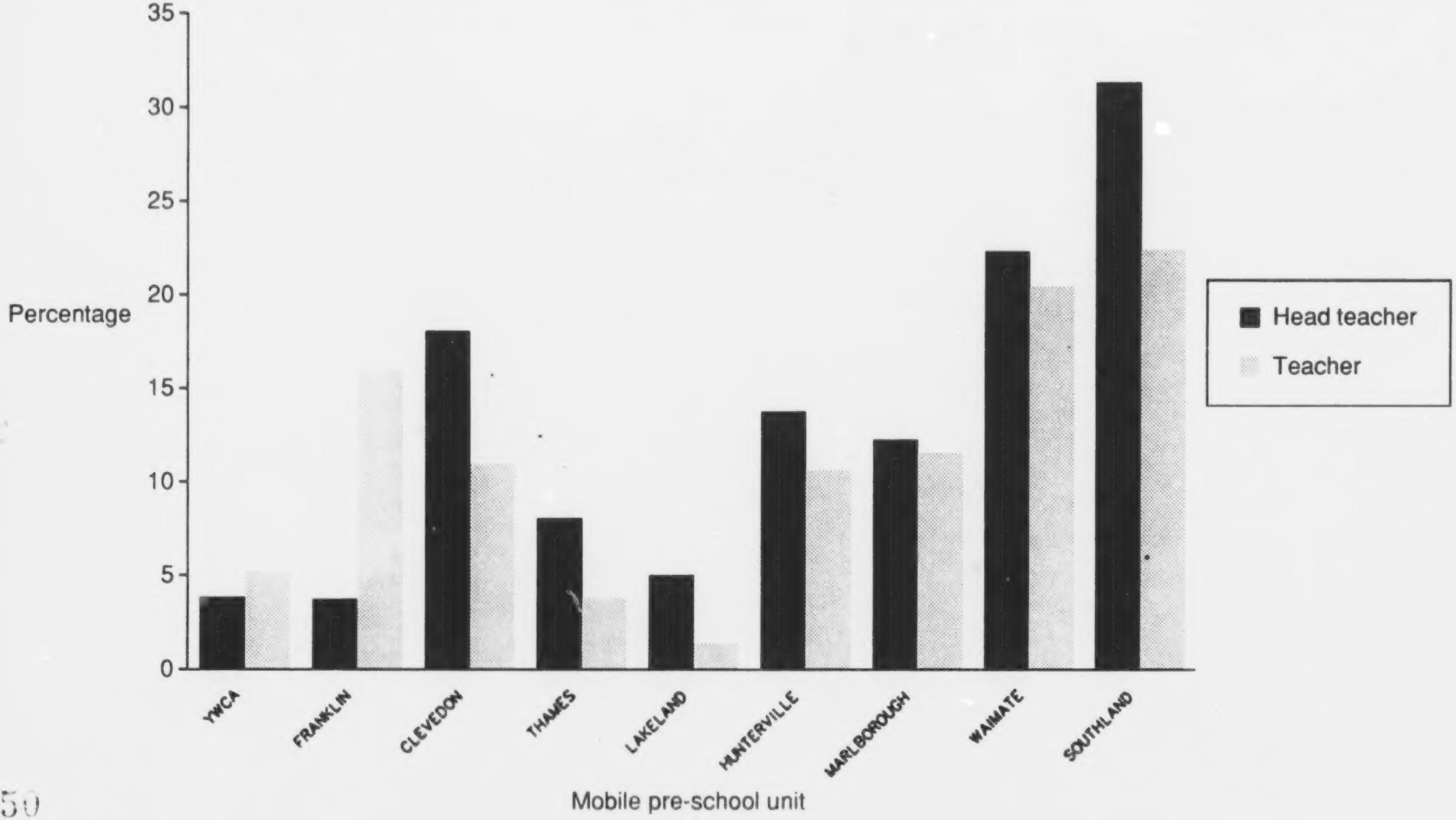
The head teacher at the Southland mobile pre-school unit was recorded as spending the greatest amount of session time leading a large group activity (31.4% of all observed intervals were spent in this way compared with between 4% and 22% of intervals for all other teachers). The programme which was run by the teachers at this unit consisted of free play for the first half of the session, and a highly structured second half (all large group work) during which the children sang songs as a group (accompanied by the head teacher on guitar), did action songs, played games, and listened to a story. (The second teacher also participated in these activities but to a lesser extent than the head teacher as she tended to carry out housekeeping tasks before joining in.) The Waimate mobile pre-school unit teachers had the second highest percentage of recorded time spent on large group activity (head teacher, 22.4%; second teacher, 20.5%). Again, this was because the teachers ran a programme which was mainly free play in the first half of the session, followed by activities in which the entire group (excepting very young toddlers who were encouraged to stay with their parents in a separate room) took part. The two teachers shared, almost equally between them, the responsibilities involved in running the large group activities .

The head teacher at the Clevedon mobile unit, who was recorded as spending approximately 18% of her time leading a large group activity, began sessions with a mat-time (while the other teacher continued with other activities), as a chance to greet the children, discuss homework books, and to outline the day's programme.

The time that teachers from individual units spent on large group work was not always due only to teacher philosophy or preference but was also influenced, at least to some extent, by parental wishes, the accommodation available to groups, and the age of the children who attended sessions.

Parents from some communities favoured programmes that appeared more 'formal' (ie where the entire session was not entirely devoted to free play), and more oriented towards school. Teachers at the Hunterville unit, for instance, felt that, contrary to their own philosophy regarding the importance of free play, there were subtle pressures on them to run a more structured programme which included regular large group activities.

Figure 4.2: Percentage of total observed intervals that teachers from each mobile unit spent in leading a group activity



Mobile pre-school unit teachers, unlike most teachers in standard kindergartens who have their own permanent buildings, frequently had to cope with the problem of inadequate facilities in which to run sessions. The characteristics of available facilities can have a significant effect on the type of programme that is run eg the relative time devoted to free play and large group activities. In bad weather, for instance, the entire session may have to be held inside, and if the place where the group is gathered is only small, a large group activity is likely to be much more feasible - and manageable - than having a variety of activities set out in a confined space.

Another important influence on whether teachers ran large group activities such as mat-times, was the age range of the children at particular groups. Teachers from certain units often commented that they incorporated mat-times into sessions where the children were generally older (4-5 years) but did not do so when the children were mostly considerably younger, mainly because they felt that the youngest children were not ready to sit still for very long and did not, therefore, gain a great deal from such activities.

Other factors relating to the incidence of large group activity may have been **group size** and **frequency of visits by the mobile unit** to particular groups. Although many groups visited by mobile pre-school units were relatively small, others were large. It may be, therefore, that when attendance levels were high, making it much more difficult to interact with all children either individually or in small groups, teachers found it was more efficient use of their time, and that of the children's, to incorporate at least some large group work into sessions, especially sessions held for groups visited only once or twice a week. (Some of the largest groups were attached to the Southland and Waimate mobile units, which, as shown above, had the highest recorded incidence of large group activities. In addition, at the time the fieldwork was carried out, each of these units visited groups only once a week). Large group work can be a means of ensuring that all children take part in an activity during session time and can also be a way of satisfying parents that their children have 'done something', often important to parents unhappy that their children cannot attend a pre-school institution more frequently.

Supervision of Children

Overall, teachers spent a relatively small percentage (7.2%) of their time on general overseeing of children. Compared to teachers in Smith et al's (1988) study, for example, this was considerably less time than is often spent on this activity in kindergartens. Teachers in the previous study, spent an average (mean) of around 17% of observed intervals in supervising children. Teachers in early childhood education centres not infrequently state that the number of children they are required to supervise means they have much less time to spend interacting on a deeper level with children. In 1982, Rogers and Hawk (cited in Smith and McMillan, 1987) conducted research related to child-teacher ratios in New Zealand kindergartens. They concluded that:

> **"...because kindergarten teachers are expected to perform a multitude of tasks, they seldom get to perform the task for which they were trained - to teach the young children who attend kindergarten." (p.31)**

This was reported to be a considerable frustration for teachers. The results from the present study, however, suggest that lack of time to spend with individual children or with small groups was **not** (except in a few instances where group size was large) a major problem for mobile pre-school unit teachers. Again, this was undoubtedly because of small group size and the number of parents present at many sessions which allowed teachers to work with the children rather than being forced to devote their energies to a large amount of supervision.

Caregiving of Children

The percentage of intervals spent by teachers on 'caregiving of children' (eg helping children to wash hands, to put on or remove items of clothing, and tending to children who hurt themselves etc) represented only a small proportion (1.8%) of the overall time that teachers spent on the various activities listed in Table 2.1. This is almost certainly less time than many teachers in standard kindergartens would spend in this way (see Smith et al's Three's Company? study), especially given the young age of many of the children who attend mobile pre-school units, and was probably the result of there frequently being large numbers of parents who remained throughout mobile unit sessions and relieved teachers of most of these sorts of responsibilities. (Parents of toddlers, at most groups, were **required** to supervise their own children.) Table 4.3 shows the percentage of total observed intervals spent on caregiving of children.

Table 4.3: The percentage of total observed intervals that teachers spent in 'caregiving of children'

Mobile unit	Head teacher (%)	Second teacher (%)
YWCA	3.2	3.0
Franklin	0.5	0.2
Clevedon	1.1	0.6
Thames	0.2	1.7
Lakeland	1.0	1.8
Hunterville	4.5	1.3
Marlborough	2.9	1.4
Waimate	2.4	2.9
Southland	1.8	2.7

Caregiving of the Environment

As will be shown, considerably more time was spent by teachers in 'caregiving of the environment' (eg carrying out 'housekeeping' tasks such as tidying or cleaning up, unpacking or packing equipment into the van, undertaking basic administrative or clerical tasks etc) than was spent, say, on caregiving children. This is not unexpected given that the units are mobile in nature, requiring much unpacking and packing of equipment, and the need to set up the work and play area almost from scratch at many venues in order for sessions to get underway. Table 4.4 shows the percentage of observed intervals that teachers from different mobile units spent on caregiving of the environment. (The results are also pictorially represented in Figure 4.3).

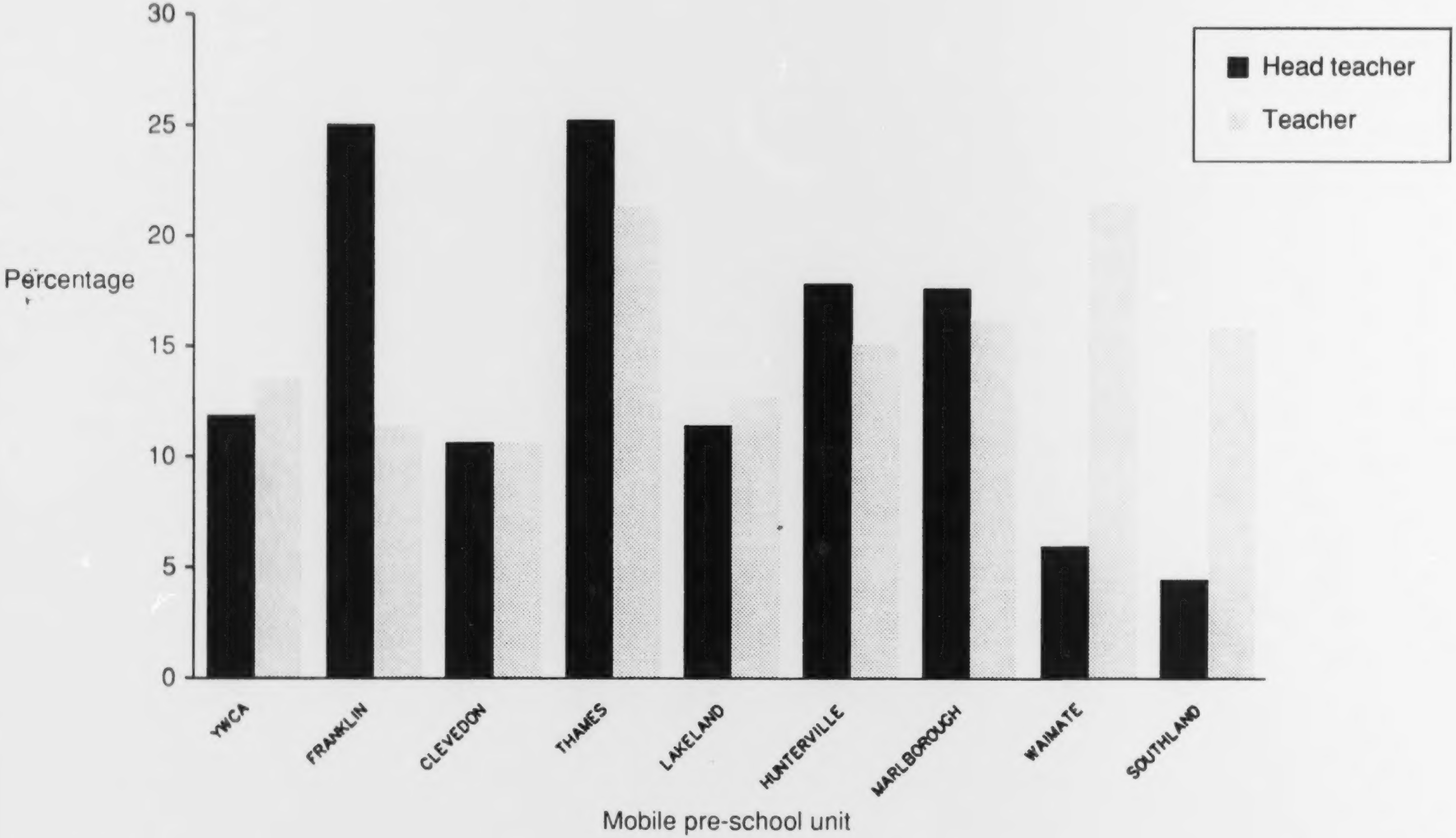
Table 4.4: The percentage of total observed intervals that teachers spent on 'caregiving of the environment'

Mobile unit	Head teacher (%)	Second teacher (%)
YWCA	11.9	13.6
Franklin	25.1	11.4
Clevedon	10.7	10.7
Thames	25.3	21.4
Lakeland	11.5	12.7
Hunterville	17.9	15.2
Marlborough	17.7	16.3
Waimate	6.0	21.6
Southland	4.5	15.9

As can be seen from Table 4.4 and Figure 4.3, the amount of time that teachers spent in this way varied considerably between teachers both from the same and from different mobile units. The head teacher at the Franklin mobile pre-school unit and both teachers at Thames, for example, each spent approximately one quarter of their time on 'caregiving of the environment', compared with between 4.5% and 17.9% for all other teachers. Much of the 'caregiving of the environment' behaviour recorded for the head teacher at Franklin was made up of administrative tasks which she carried out during sessions while the second teacher took the children for mat-time or some other large group activity. This accounts for the finding that this teacher spent more than twice as much time on 'caregiving of the environment' as the other teacher she worked with.

Observations at the Thames mobile pre-school unit were carried out during a week in which parents were being initiated into a 'new' (unfamiliar to them) system for making donations to the kindergarten. Parents were finding the system complicated and so the teachers spent considerable time during sessions, both with parents and separately, trying to overcome the problems and confusion. It is therefore probable that the Thames unit was observed at an atypical time in this respect, with the result that this category of behaviour may have been recorded at an unusually high level. (The problem with donations, however, would also have had an effect on the amount of recorded time that teachers spent on talking to parents during the observation period.)

Figure 4.3: Percentage of total observed intervals that teachers from each mobile unit spent on caregiving of the environment



The head teacher and second teacher at each of the YWCA, Clevedon, Lakeland, Hunterville and Marlborough units spent very similar proportions of time engaged in caregiving of the environment. The second teachers at the Waimate and Southland units, however, spent more than three times longer on housekeeping tasks than the head teachers, suggesting that caregiving of the environment was the major responsibility of the second teacher at these units. (In both cases, a significant proportion of time spent in this way by the second teacher during session times was when the head teacher was leading a large group activity.)

In the general brief for this study it was emphasised that it was important to obtain an estimate of the amount of time that mobile pre-school unit teachers spent in packing and unpacking equipment from the vans and generally preparing for sessions. The time taken to unpack and pack up equipment **before** and **after** sessions was not recorded during the observation procedure (instead, this 'caregiving of the environment' behaviour was noted in the session checklists - see details in the case studies for each unit, Volume II)) but once sessions began, the time spent on household chores by teachers at mobile pre-school units was probably no higher than in standard kindergartens, given that there were usually parents present who were able to help with these tasks, leaving the teachers freer to interact with children (and parents). Smith et al (1988), for example, showed that, collectively, the teachers in their sample (both in two-teacher and three-teacher kindergartens) spent more time (between a mean of 16.7% and a mean of 27.2% of observed intervals, recorded at three different times of year) on caregiving of the environment than teachers in the present study.

Talking to Parents

Because it was known that parents often remain during sessions held by mobile pre-school units, the activity category 'talking to parents' (to indicate times when teachers were able to devote all or almost all of a given interval to interacting with a parent) was added to the observation schedule. This is a category not used in previous studies employing the observation instrument described in Chapter 2. Data revealed that mobile unit teachers overall were able to devote almost 10% of their time to talking exclusively to parents, without simultaneously having to supervise children, do housekeeping tasks, and so on. From observations carried out in connection with previous studies, the present researchers felt that the opportunity that mobile pre-school unit teachers had to give their entire attention to parents while talking with them, seldom occurred for teachers in standard kindergartens. This appeared to be because of the many and varied demands on those teachers, when there were few, if any, other adults present to support them. Mobile pre-school unit teachers' interactions with parents are discussed more fully on page 142 following.

Talking to Visitors and to Teachers

The activities 'talking to visitors' and 'talking to teachers' were also added to the observation schedule specifically for the present study.

'Visitors' included such people as senior teachers, district or public health nurses, speech therapists, kindergarten association representatives, individuals invited to run or contribute to special activities or events, and teachers from schools or other early childhood facilities. Although teachers were observed to spend very little time (0.7%) talking with visitors during the weeks of observation, this is something that is likely to be intermittent, with teachers sometimes having to spend considerable time with visitors, and at other times, none at all.

The percentage of intervals that teachers spent talking exclusively to the other teacher with whom they worked was also very small. However, as shown in Figure 4.1, teachers did talk to one another in an average of 4.3% of all observed intervals: such interaction, though, was almost always in conjunction with some other activity such as facilitating play, leading a large group activity, or caregiving of the environment.

Teacher Behaviours in Relation to Children: A Brief Overview

As shown in Figure 4.1, teachers spent the greatest percentage of observed intervals in initiating verbal exchanges with children (this behaviour occurred in a little more than one-third of observed intervals), followed by responding verbally to something a child said to them (19.1%).

A significant amount of teachers' time was also devoted to giving children directions (these were observed to be frequently related to activities eg telling a child how to use scissors, rather than to telling children how to behave etc) and to exposition (explaining **why**, how something works etc), often a measure of 'quality language'. (The behaviour 'Conversation' is also regarded as a measure of quality language - conversations between teachers and children are discussed more fully later in the chapter.) The extent to which teachers are likely to demonstrate directive and expository behaviours when interacting with children is often not just a feature of teacher style but also a response to variables such as the age of the child (the age range at many groups served by the mobile units was frequently very wide).

Teachers overall were recorded as spending an average of 12.4% of observed intervals on non-verbal initiation (eg the teacher touches the child, gestures, points to something or holds out material for the child to take) with children. Unfortunately, however, there appears to have been an observer difference in connection with this category: one observer consistently rated all teachers (at four units) that she observed as exhibiting this behaviour considerably more often than teachers observed by the other researcher.

Figure 4.1 shows that teachers exhibited 'socioemotional positive behaviour' ('an interaction suggesting shared positive affect towards a child' eg the teacher smiles or laughs at the child, hugs or comforts child, holds the child's hand) for an average of 16.0% of observed intervals. This is perhaps a lower level than might be expected. (Teachers in Smith et al's (1988) study demonstrated this behaviour in around 25% of intervals.) However, this was clearly not because teachers did not provide a warm and caring environment for children (see parents' views on this in Chapter 5) but was perhaps more a feature of children being able to receive this sort of attention from their parents as well as from teachers during sessions. It may also have been because children were so occupied with what they were doing (children being engrossed in activities, with little negative interaction between peers and an apparently low level of 'unoccupied behaviour' was a notable feature of many of the sessions which were observed) that they had less 'need' for demonstrations of positive affect such as hugs, and being able to hold the teacher's hand. The present results, too, may partly be a feature of the somewhat limited scope of this behaviour category ie socioemotional positive behaviour was confined to definite positive statements about a child, and to smiles, hugs etc - in other words, to behaviours which could be defined in objective terms and readily observed, rather than to other forms of positive affect which were much more tenuous (such as tone of voice, choice of words) and subject to individual interpretations by different observers. The limits put on the category of 'socioemotional positive' affect, therefore, meant that other demonstrations of warmth by teachers when interacting with children in the normal course of a session could not be recorded using the observational instrument employed in this study. However, it is felt that information gathered more informally during the course of the fieldwork periods (see individual case studies in Volume II) gives ample evidence of the positive and supportive atmosphere provided for children at sessions.

The incidence of 'socioemotional negative' behaviour (eg teacher frowns at or scolds child) from teachers was almost non-existent: children very seldom needed 'disciplining' beyond a straightforward directional statement.

In Part II of this chapter, specific aspects of the interactions between teachers and children are discussed in more detail, followed in Part III, by a discussion of major features of interactions between teachers and parents.

PART II : THE NATURE AND EXTENT OF TEACHERS' INTERACTIONS WITH CHILDREN

As has already been indicated, and as discussed further below, the relatively small numbers of children attending many of the mobile unit sessions (and/or the help received from parents at groups where the roll numbers were much higher) frequently enabled teachers to spend a large part of their time interacting with children on a one-to-one basis or in small groups. Teachers reported that they felt that turnover rates for children in mobile units were not as high as for standard kindergartens, and that this, together with small group size and many children attending sessions from a young age, meant that they were often able to get to know individual children very well (even despite the infrequency of visits to many groups). The opportunity to work intensively with children was frequently mentioned by teachers as the most enjoyable aspect of working on a mobile unit:

> **"Because there are so few children you spend more time with them, you can give them more. I like it, it's sort of like a family."**

> **"I enjoy working with the small groups of children. I think you can achieve a lot more, taking into account the varied age groups. We get to know the individual children a little bit better than is possible with having large groups."**

> **"Because you see the children from when they are born, basically, until they go to school you just see so many more developments than you would in a normal kindergarten, when you have only got them, say, from four to five years old."**

The importance of the quality of the interactions that take place between teachers/staff and children in early childhood centres has been well documented.

Smith (1988) in her book Understanding Children's Development, stated that research has shown that adults' conversations with children influence the speed of acquiring language skills: when children are encouraged to talk with caregivers (including teachers/staff in early childhood centres) they know well, in an atmosphere of trust, they are more likely to practise talking and to have conversations with adults.

The importance of conversations and extended (sustained) verbal interactions between teachers and children is further demonstrated in research by Tennant, McNaughton, and Glynn (1988). They conducted a study designed to enhance children's language through conversations with their caregiver, firstly by introducing extra toys into play sessions, and secondly, adding caregiver training with verbal and written instructions. One of their major findings was as follows:

> **"There is a functional relationship between the quantity and the quality of language interactions and language acquisition, such that the increased ratio of conversations between child and caregiver results in increased rates of child language acquisition." (p.39)**

Glynn (cited in Tennant, McNaughton, and Glynn, 1988), indicated the importance of 'responsive social contexts' for the acquisition of language and literacy. Such social contexts encourage initiations by learners, shared tasks giving rise to reciprocal learning, and responsive rather than corrective feedback on these tasks:

> **"The provision of such responsive social contexts supports the view of children as active agents who have acquired a degree of control over their own learning through reciprocal interaction with caregivers." (p.39)**

Research has shown that the warm relationships between teachers and children necessary for facilitating language are more likely to develop with smaller group numbers. Anne Meade (1985), for example, in her study of the ways in which adults spend their time in kindergartens, playcentres and childcare centres in New Zealand, found that group size was an important variable influencing the way adults allocated their time in pre-school and the amount of attention they gave children. (Studies cited in Smith et al's Three's Company study, 1988 also show the importance of group size). From analysis of teachers' behaviours (recorded by means of the observation scale used in the present study) in relation to group size, Meade concuded that:

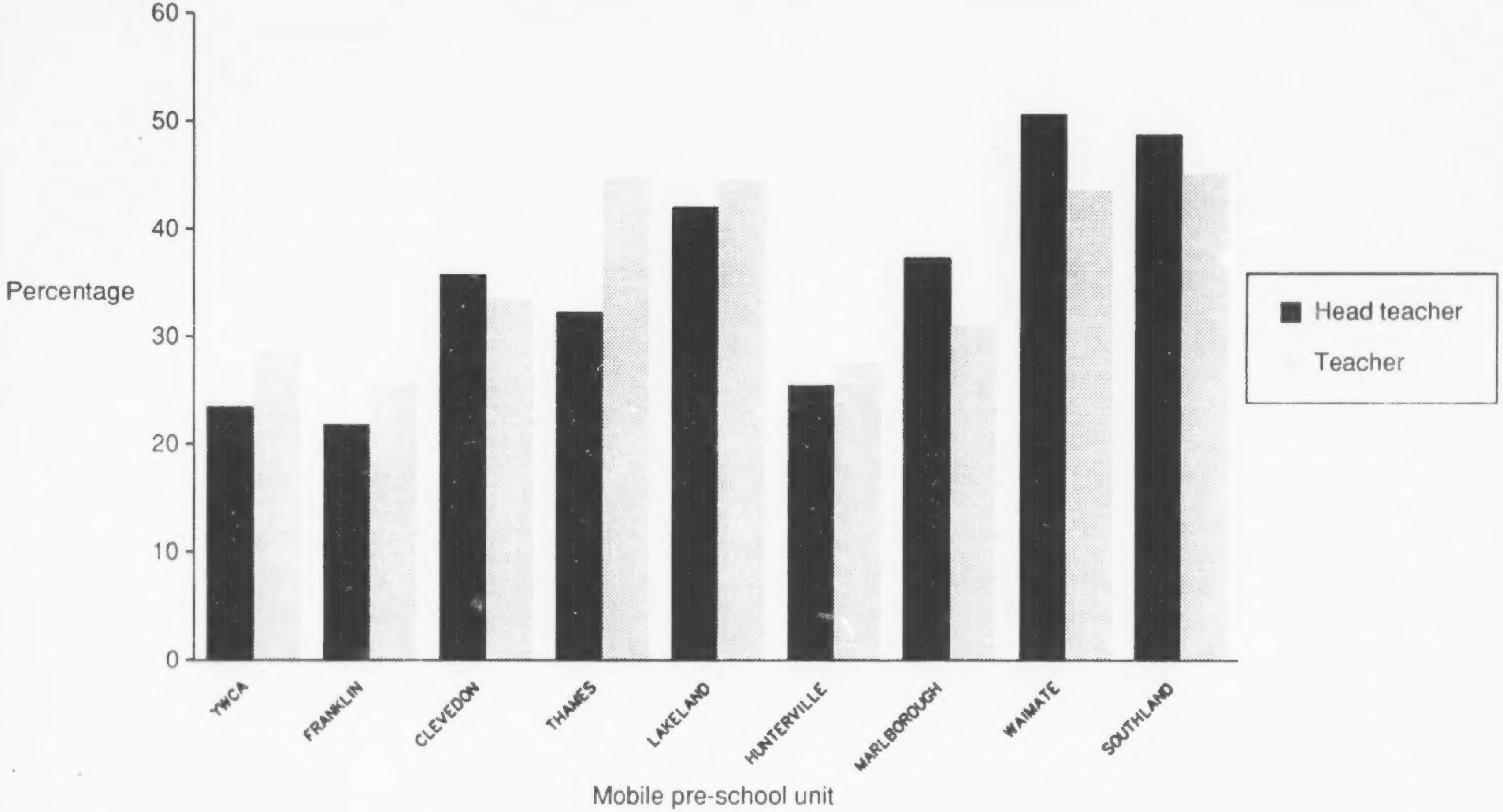
> **"In large group centres, the proportion of time spent on giving 'Commands', 'Affective' behaviour, 'Group' activities, 'Care-giving to Children' and 'Interacting with Staff' was considerably higher than that observed in the four smaller group centres. There was also more 'Uninvolved' time, which was surprising, as we assumed that there would have been fewer chances for time-out. In addition, 'uninvolvement' was more often observed when the ratio was poor - that is, one adult to many children." (p78)**

From our observations, and other information, it appeared that the set up of mobile pre-school units influenced the nature of the interactions that teachers had with children to a significant degree. For example, teachers were able to spend a large portion of their time 'facilitating play', with less need than is probably usual in standard kindergartens, especially two-teacher kindergartens with full rolls, to devote their energies to 'supervision' or 'caregiving of the child'. Further, as discussed in more detail below, teachers appeared to have more scope to sustain verbal and non-verbal interactions with children, and even to engage in conversations with children, which as Meade (1985) and others have pointed out was not often evident - or possible - in standard kindergartens. It was the opportunity to have such interactions with children that was a major contributor to the considerable work satisfaction expressed by mobile pre-school teachers (Chapter 3).

Verbal Initiations from Teachers to Children

As shown in Figure 4.4, differences in the extent to which teachers initiated verbal interactions with children were greater for teachers from different mobile units than they were for teachers at the same unit. The highest levels of verbal initiations were recorded for teachers at the Waimate and Southland mobile pre-school units. The reason for this, perhaps, was that many of these, often isolated, country children were reported by the teachers to be not only very young but also "shy" which meant that it could take considerable time and effort to establish a relationship with individual children, especially since each of the groups served by these units was visited only once a week. If the teachers at these units had not initiated verbal exchanges, and actively encouraged verbal responses, it is very likely that there would only have been a small amount of language occurring between the teachers and children (and even between children, given that many of them saw one another only once a week). Although other observational data show that these teachers spent considerably less time on responding verbally to something that the children had said than they did on verbal initiations (this pattern, however, would be a not unexpected result in any early childhood education setting where interactions between adults and children are concerned), they were nevertheless clearly helping to facilitate language amongst the children they worked with. This was most evident during the time set aside for the older children to tell the teachers - and the rest of the group - what they had completed in their homework books since last time. The children involved (usually not a large number at any given group) often initiated verbal exchanges rather than just responding to what the teacher said.

Figure 4.4: Percentage of total observed intervals in which teachers from each mobile unit initiated verbal interactions with children



Sustained Interactions with Children, Including Conversation between Children and Teachers

Smith (1983) stated:

> **"Unfortunately there is considerable evidence... that preschool and junior class situations rarely provide the opportunity for extended conversations between teacher and child. It is important that teachers and caregivers encourage such conversations if the classroom is to have any relevance to children's language development." (p.167)**

Data from the present study, however, have shown that because of frequently being able to work with smaller groups of children, mobile pre-school unit teachers had greater opportunities for sustained interactions with children (ie where verbal, non-verbal, and/or socioemotional exchanges between a child and a teacher lasted for two or more observed intervals) and the children a far greater chance of interacting with adults. Teachers placed importance on talking with children who normally had little conversation with adults other than their parents or caregivers, due to living in isolated rural (and sometimes urban) areas.

Table 4.5 shows the percentage of time teachers spent in sustained interactions[23] with one child at a time and the percentage of total observed intervals that involved sustained conversations between teachers and children. The average (mean) length of sustained interactions that individual teachers had with children varied between 3.0 and 4.6 intervals (or around 45 to 70 seconds[24]) in length. Some teachers were also able to have several interactions with individual children which endured for two minutes or more.

The time spent by teachers in sustained interactions with children is graphed in Figure 4.5. As can be seen, the Lakeland mobile unit teachers were recorded as spending the greatest amount of time in sustained interactions with children (head teacher, 39.9%; second teacher, 39.7%). One probable reason for the high rate of extended interactions - and conversations - that these teachers had with individual children was that one group was visited by the mobile

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[23] 'Sustained interactions' between teachers and individual children were those that continued over **two or more** observed intervals. Most of the sustained interactions which were recorded lasted between 2 and 4 intervals (30 seconds to 1 minute in duration) before an interruption occurred but there were also a considerable number of such interactions which endured for two or more minutes (see Table 4.5). (Although it was not possible in the present study to record the rate at which this occurred, it was very apparent during the fieldwork period that teachers were also often able to have several sustained interactions with the same child during a session). Sustained interactions involved not only the behaviour category 'conversation' but also any or all of categories 1 to 9 listed in Table 2.1 eg verbal initiation, verbal response, direction, exposition, or a positive socioemotional exchange (smile, hug, etc).

[24] For present purposes, when calculating length of extended or sustained interactions, an interval is taken to be 15 seconds (which includes the 5 seconds recording time) rather than 10 seconds. This was because such interactions almost certainly always carried on unbroken from one 10 second observation interval to another.

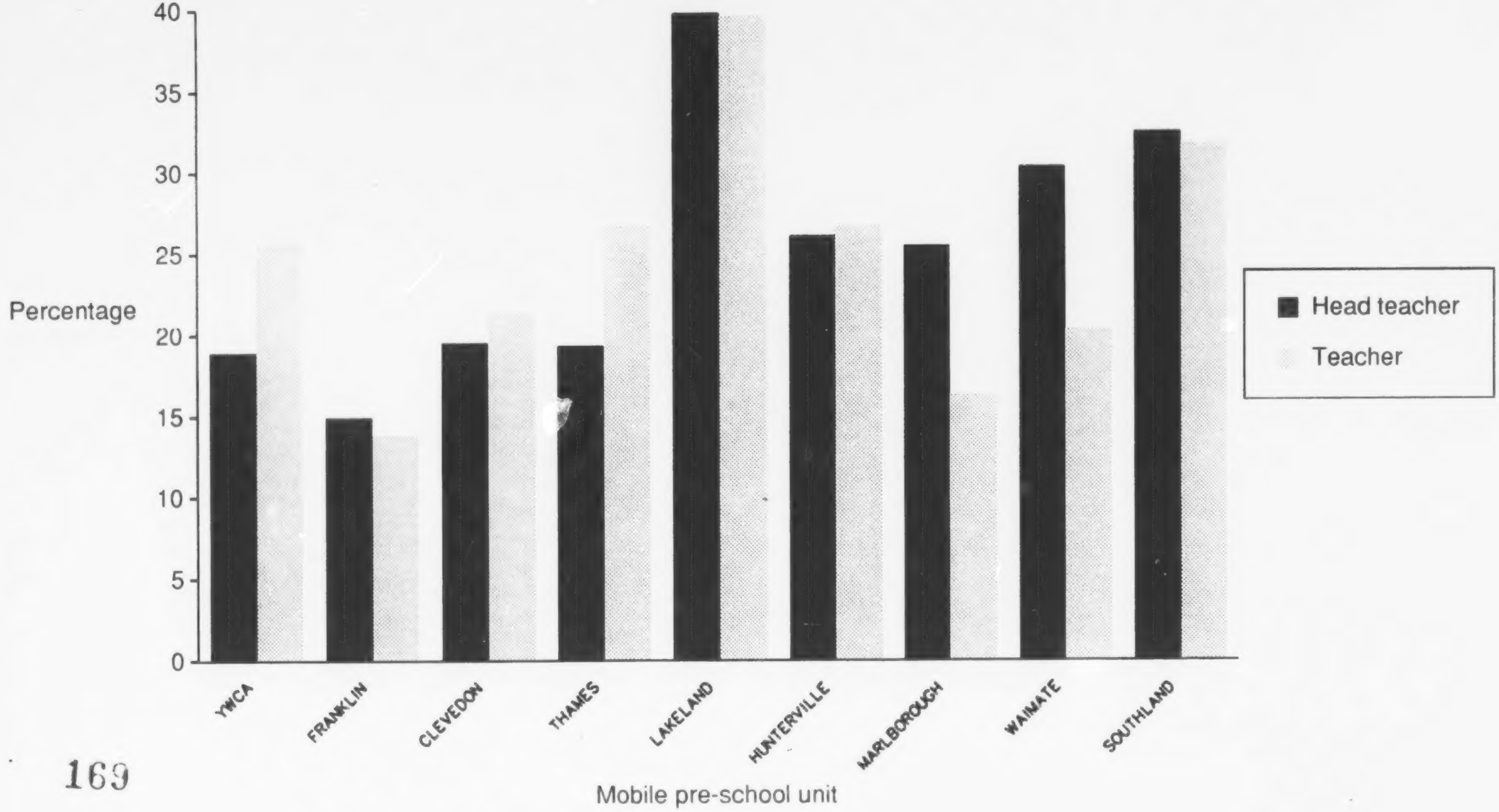
Table 4.5 : Summary table of teachers' sustained interactions/conversations with children

Mobile unit/teacher	Percentage of all observed intervals which were spent in sustained interactions* with individual children %	Percentage of all observed intervals which were spent in sustained conversations† with children %	Total number of sustained interactions/ conversations teachers had with children N	Mean ($\bar{x}$) length of sustained interactions and/or conversations $\bar{X}$	Range (ie upper and lower limits on number of intervals spent in sustained interactions	Number of sustained interactions/conversations that were 8 or more intervals in length (ie 2 minutes plus) N	Percentage of all sustained interactions/ conversations which were 2 minutes or longer in length %
YWCA							
Head Teacher	19.0	0.3	30	4.6	2 - 14	6	20.0
Teacher	25.8	1.1	43	4.6	2 - 18	6	14.0
Franklin							
Head Teacher	15.0	0.3	29	4.6	2 - 14	5	17.2
Teacher	13.9	1.2	34	3.9	2 - 17	5	14.7
Clevedon							
Head Teacher	19.6	2.7	44	3.3	2 - 8	1	2.3
Teacher	21.4	4.2	42	3.7	2 - 18	2	4.8
Thames							
Head Teacher	19.4	4.7	68	3.4	2 - 19	1	1.5
Teacher	26.8	1.3	94	3.4	2 - 12	4	4.3
Lakeland							
Head Teacher	39.9	6.6	107	3.7	2 - 13	9	8.4
Teacher	39.7	5.3	108	3.9	2 - 13	13	12.0
Hunterville							
Head Teacher	26.2	2.1	73	3.7	2 - 16	6	8.2
Teacher	26.8	0.7	74	3.6	2 - 15	4	5.4
Marlborough							
Head Teacher	25.6	3.3	105	3.0	2 - 15	4	3.8
Teacher	16.4	4.6	64	3.0	2 - 10	2	3.1
Waimate							
Head Teacher	20.4	4.6	55	3.9	2 - 13	4	7.3
Teacher	30.5	6.5	99	3.4	2 - 13	8	8.1
Southland							
Head Teacher	32.6	6.0	105	3.8	2 - 14	12	11.4
Teacher	31.9	4.6	107	3.4	2 - 18	7	6.5

* 'Sustained interactions' were interactions between a teacher and an individual child which endured for two or more consecutive observed intervals. Because of the procedure which the observers followed of observing teachers alternately (ie observing one teacher for a maximum period of 5 minutes - or 20 intervals - before switching to the other teacher) sustained interactions could never be recorded as longer than 20 intervals. 'Sustained interactions' could contain any of the behaviours listed in Table 2.1 relating to children.

† 'Sustained conversations" were those interactions between teachers and children which occurred for two or more consecutive intervals and were entirely devoted to conversation: 'a verbal exchange with a child which is part of a sustained conversation and where it is impossible to tell who initiated and who responded'.

Figure 4.5: Percentage of total observed intervals that teachers from each mobile unit spent in sustained interactions with individual children



unit three times a week. This, together with the relatively small (compared to conventional town kindergartens) numbers who attended the unit enabled the teachers to get to know the children well and to spend a large part of sessions working either with small groups or with individual children. The group's venue was close to the centre of Taupo and very few parents remained for the entire session due to work commitments and/or a preference for some time on their own: this may also have allowed teachers greater opportunity to spend time talking to children. (Although, at many groups, the presence of parents enabled teachers to spend less time on supervision, caregiving of the environment, and caregiving of children and more time on facilitating play etc, sometimes the presence of parents meant that children were tempted to talk more to the adults they were most familiar with and less to the teachers, especially if the parents themselves initiated verbal exchanges with their children. Lastly, but most importantly, the data on the Lakeland mobile pre-school unit teachers reflect the teachers' working philosophy: to give children the opportunity to experience quality language and to encourage children themselves to extend their own language.

As discussed in Chapter 3, mobile pre-school unit teachers aimed to provide the 'responsive social contexts' advocated by Glynn (1985) above by ensuring there were a variety of activities available at each session for children to work on and discuss, usually on a free play basis. Children who attended mobile unit sessions - like children attending other types of early childhood education centres - were therefore able to have access to materials and equipment which they did not have at home. The children could practise their developing language skills with adults other than their parents (as well as with their peers) and increase their vocabulary by talking about the activities at pre-school with the teachers. Other findings from studies cited by Smith (1988), show that outings to venues outside the pre-school, and having a wide range of activities available gives adults and children greater opportunity for communicating interests. This was something that all mobile unit teachers tried to organise - within the limitations imposed by the pre-schools being mobile in nature.

As shown in Table 4.2 and Figure 4.1, teachers overall were recorded as initiating a high level of verbal exchanges with children which showed that even though many children, especially the youngest ones, frequently did not initiate verbal exchanges themselves - c.f. the lower rate at which teachers were recorded as making 'verbal responses' - teachers were constantly encouraging children to extend their vocabulary and facility with language by actively using language themselves.

The Nature of Interactions Between the Mobile Pre-School Unit Teachers and Children : A Summary Statement

Both the observation data and other information from the present study show that there was considerable conversation between different teachers and individual children. This finding is in contrast to findings from other studies on early childhood education centres. Meade (1985), for example, found that there was less adult-child talk than expected, and few sustained conversations between adults and children in the early childhood centres which were studied. She stated that conversations between staff and children were more likely to occur when teachers placed a high priority on these interactions (p.6) - this was a stated priority of the mobile unit teachers, the practice of which appears to be borne out by the present data.

The smaller groups at mobile unit sessions appeared to increase the likelihood of adult-child conversation, and teachers stressed communication skills when describing their personal educational philosophy for working with children (see Chapter 3). For example, when asked what they were trying to accomplish in their work with children, typical responses from the mobile pre-school unit teachers were:

> **"It's just getting these children to communicate with another adult outside their family, as a lot of them probably only ever see their parents, and you know, if they are used to communicating with us, by the time they go to school, they can relate to their teachers. Whereas if they haven't learnt that skill, when they get to primary school they probably won't have such a good chance of learning straight away because they will be too scared of the teacher."**
>
> **"Communication is the most important... not just speech, but body language and [children] being able to talk to adults and [other] children...It's more important for the mobile unit children, because a lot of them are more isolated because they're coming from isolated farming communities. A lot of them only see other children during our session times, and that is their only experience with sharing and having to think about someone else - perhaps more so than town children."**

The value of the mobile unit teachers' emphasis on verbal communication with children is supported by other studies. For example, Meade (1985) cites research which revealed that children who received more attention from adults developed better language skills, especially when the adult attention was not confined to managerial directions.

Previous studies have also shown that teacher-child conversation is valuable, not only for developing closer relationships between teachers and children and for its part in enhancing children's grasp of language, but also for the effect it has on teacher-parent relationships. Smith and Hubbard (1988b), for example, observed that children talking more with teachers "was associated with close parent/staff relationships, the parent knowing the staff better, and the staff member being more supportive to the parent." (p.24)

It would appear, therefore, that the number and quality of the interactions that mobile pre-school unit teachers manage to have with children within the framework of the overall programmes that they provide, have the potential for very positive longer term benefits for the children who attend mobile unit sessions Also, although many of these children do not have the advantage of 'town or city children' who can attend pre-school every day, this is offset to a considerable extent by small group size and teachers being able to spend more time with them either one-to-one or as part of a small group.

PART III : TEACHERS' INTERACTIONS WITH PARENTS

The amount of time, overall, that teachers spent interacting with parents varied between teachers and between units according to the personal philosophy and teaching style of the teachers, the philosophy of the particular mobile unit (which seemed to have been built up over the years and passed from teacher to teacher in some subtle way), and also the nature of the communities in which the teachers were working. Figure 4.6 shows the percentage of total observed intervals that each teacher spent in interacting with parents, while Table 4.6 gives a breakdown of the ways in which teachers interacted with parents (ie whether it was greeting or farewelling parents at the beginning or end of sessions; conversing casually about topics such as items of local interest, television programmes etc; giving or exchanging information relating, amongst other things, to the mobile unit, parenting, and child development; or discussing with parents' their personal problems). (Note that the time spent on greetings/farewells - only 0.7% of observed intervals for teachers overall, Figure 4.1 - was perhaps more a feature of the observation procedure than of 'reality', ie because it usually took a few minutes at the beginning of each session to prepare to observe, and the researchers usually arrived at venues at the same time as the teachers, it was possible that the observers sometimes did not see teachers greeting parents, especially those parents who arrived early. However, it is also likely that, because many parents stayed throughout sessions, there was less need for teachers to make a special point of greeting or farewelling parents.)

Figure 4.6: Percentage of total observed intervals in which teachers from each mobile unit interacted with parents

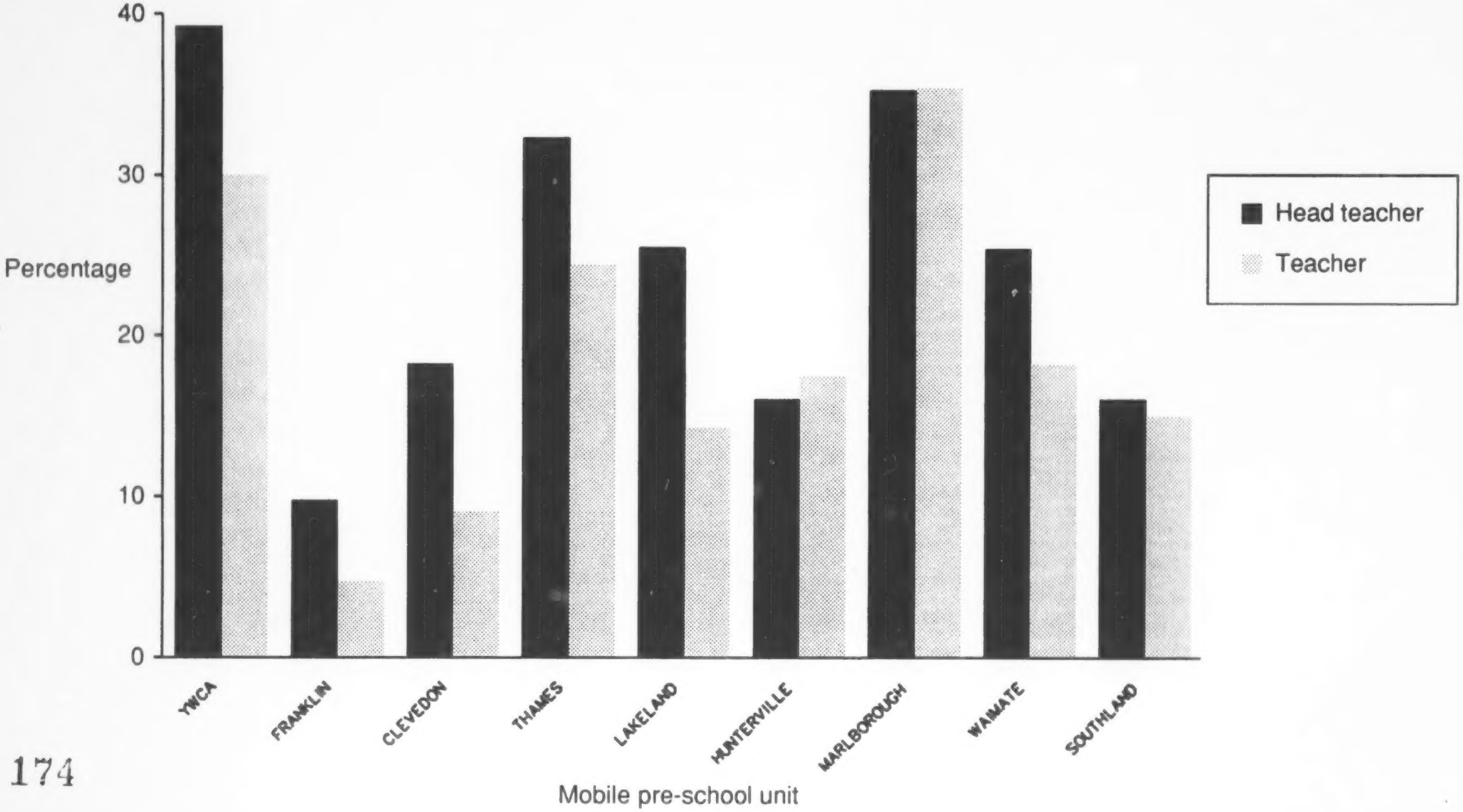


Table 4.6 : The percentage of total observed intervals that each teacher spent in various types of interactions with parents

Mobile unit/teacher	Type of interaction				
	Greeting or farewell %	Information sharing %	Casual conversation %	Personal problems %	Total % of intervals spent in interacting with parents
YWCA					
Head Teacher	0.7	27.1	10.1	1.4	39.3
Teacher	0.7	20.1	6.7	2.6	30.1
Franklin					
Head Teacher	0.7	6.4	2.5	0.2	9.8
Teacher	0.0	2.7	2.1	0.0	4.8
Clevedon					
Head Teacher	0.7	16.2	1.4	0.0	18.3
Teacher	0.4	5.6	2.4	0.7	9.1
Thames					
Head Teacher	1.6	8.0	22.8	0.0	32.4
Teacher	0.8	7.2	16.5	0.0	24.5
Lakeland					
Head Teacher	1.5	1.5	22.6	0.0	25.6
Teacher	0.8	0.7	12.9	0.0	14.4
Hunterville					
Head Teacher	0.4	12.4	3.3	0.0	16.1
Teacher	0.1	10.2	7.1	0.1	17.5
Marlborough					
Head Teacher	0.4	7.2	27.2	0.6	35.4
Teacher	0.5	1.8	33.2	0.0	35.5
Waimate					
Head Teacher	0.7	4.9	17.8	2.1	25.5
Teacher	0.7	4.3	13.3	0.0	18.3
Southland					
Head Teacher	1.5	4.3	10.3	0.0	16.1
Teacher	1.2	2.2	11.6	0.0	15.0

The philosophy of the YWCA unit emphasised working with parents as much as with children. This was borne out by the data which showed that the teachers at this unit had a high rate of interactions with parents. Teachers at the Franklin mobile pre-school unit, however, had a considerably lower level of interactions with parents. This was again congruent with their preferred way of working and teaching ie these teachers viewed session times primarily as opportunities for children to interact with individuals other than their parents. Also, as the venues where their groups met were often small, a large number of parents remaining throughout sessions meant that noise levels increased greatly and available space to work became severely limited. For these reasons, the teachers preferred parents - other than those on roster duty - not to remain during sessions. (The philosophy of the teachers at the Clevedon unit was similar to that of the Franklin teachers.)

Parents of children attending the very rural Hunterville mobile unit usually remained for the whole session as they travelled long distances to venues and it was not worth their while to return home again until the session had ended. These parents, although able to talk with teachers during session times, often appreciated the opportunity, which they would not otherwise have had, to talk with one another and catch up on the news of the area. This probably meant that there was less 'need' for teachers to spend time talking with parents and allowed more time to spend with the children.

The head teacher at Thames, and both teachers at Marlborough, stated that they thought talking to parents was both important and enjoyable - the data seem to bear out their stated attitudes and beliefs. The second teacher at Thames felt that, while talking and listening to parents was important, her chief priority was working with the children: again, the data reflect this.

Although not many parents from some of the Lakeland mobile unit's groups remained during sessions, those who did had built up positive relationships with the teachers, especially the more senior teacher, whom they had known for a longer period. (Figure 4.6)

The teachers' age, marital/parental status, and length of time that they had worked on the mobile unit probably all had some effect on the nature and extent of the interactions that were possible with parents. Several teachers, for example, reported that it took time to get to know parents when they first started in the job (made more difficult by having a number of different groups to visit); some felt, too, that parents were more likely to talk about problems with their children to older teachers who were married and had children of their own than they were to talk to younger, unmarried teachers (although this situation tended to improve once the younger teachers had been longer in their positions and parents got to know them better). Some parents also made similar comments in their questionnaires about their relationships with different teachers. Reasons such as these may account for at least some of the variation between teachers illustrated in Figure 4.6 and Table 4.6.

The Importance of the Quality of Interactions between Parents and Teachers

Research has shown that the nature and extent of teachers' interactions with parents has a number of important implications for children. Smith and Hubbard (1988b), for example, conducted a study to:

> **"Examine the quantity and quality of parent-staff communications in early childhood settings, and whether they related to measures of child behaviour and adjustment in early childhood centres." (p.13)**

Their conclusions stressed the importance of breaking down the barriers between the family and the pre-school centre. Increased closeness between staff and parents was believed to lead to positive outcomes (eg reduced level of negative interactions between children) for those associated with the centre: "Effective early childhood staff will increase their impact on children when they can relate warmly to parents." (p.14) Smith and Hubbard further stated that children benefited from teachers' closer relationships with parents in several ways, for example:

> **"When their parents relate well to staff, children also feel comfortable with staff and have more conversation with them. Staff also see children, with whose parents they have good relationships, as more happy and well adjusted to the environment." (p.25)**

Smith and Hubbard (1988a) expanded on the importance of the type of interactions that occurred between teachers and parents and teachers and children in a further study. They found that information sharing with parents helps teachers understand aspects of home life which leads to more continuity between the home and pre-school and allows teachers to have more meaningful conversations with children:

> **"When children spend a considerable time away from home in centres, knowing about ordinary activities of home or centre is especially important so that parents and staff can share meanings and understandings with children. The worlds of home and early childhood centre can thus become more meaningfully related to the child." (p.185)**

As well as the benefits for children, interactions between parents and teachers have also been shown to have positive outcomes for the parents themselves.

Smith (1988) outlined, on the basis of research findings, the importance of "friendship, companionship, and community support" (p.218) for many parents, especially single parents. Parents from the lower socioeconomic areas in West Auckland (for example) served by the YWCA mobile pre-school unit looked to the teachers for support and advice on childrearing: gaining confidence and advice on parenting skills was important for those parents who brought up their children by themselves. Even casual conversation between parents and teachers promotes friendship, and provides opportunities for parents to bring issues to teachers for discussion. Smith stated that:

> **"Mature childcare staff can become supportive of single parents in the same way as relatives or friends, when a good trusting relationship exists. Just chatting about daily events to another adult is an essential need for many single parents, but centres must be well staffed enough to allow this to happen." (p.219)**

Although previous research has shown the positive outcomes of quality interactions between parents and teachers, not all early childhood education teachers necessarily feel that work with parents is a priority in their work. Renwick (1989) conducted a national survey of kindergarten teachers which, in part, investigated the amount and forms of support teachers believed they gave to families. Results showed that "just over two-thirds of the teachers surveyed believe they have a responsibility to support the parents in their kindergartens other than in matters to do with children." (p.68) The reasons the teachers gave for supporting parents were:

> "1. **If a parent has a problem it is likely to affect the child. It is impossible to separate the interests of the child from those of the parent; if a teacher supports a parent they are in effect supporting the child...**
>
> 2. **They may be the only, or most readily available, person for the parents to talk to." (p.68)**

Other teachers in Renwick's study expressed mixed feelings about their role in supporting parents. Their uncertainty was centred around the nature of the parent problem; how well they knew the parent; the amount of experience they had had in the problem area; and the feeling that discussion of parents' problems was not part of their teaching role. Renwick, however, concluded that: "...although teachers may feel they do not have a 'responsibility' to support parents, most feel they should do so." (p.69)

As discussed in Chapter 3, however, the mobile pre-school unit teachers all felt that this was an important part of their own role (although, not unnaturally, some felt this more strongly than others), especially as parents had a high profile at many groups visited by the different units and the mobile units themselves relied so heavily on parental support. As will be shown in the remainder of this chapter, most of the mobile pre-school unit teachers generally demonstrated a high level of interactions - including sustained interactions - with parents.

The Percentage of Time that Teachers Spent in Casual Conversation with Parents

As has already been shown, the greatest proportion of the time that teachers overall spent interacting with parents was devoted to 'casual conversation'. Research has shown (eg Renwick, 1989, Smith, 1988) the value of casual conversation for helping to establish warm and positive relationships between parents and teachers, and leading the way for parents to discuss more important topics with teachers if they choose. Figure 4.7 shows the variation amongst teachers in the percentage of observed intervals spent in this way.

The teachers from the Marlborough mobile pre-school unit can be seen to have had the highest recorded level of casual conversation with parents (head teacher, 27.2%; second teacher, 33.2%). These teachers, on the other hand, exhibited a relatively low rate of information sharing with parents (7.2% and 1.8%, respectively), perhaps because of an efficient communication network operating amongst the parents (many of whom remained throughout sessions) and also because of the regularly updated information board for parents which was displayed at each session. (The teachers at this unit also made efforts to show videotapes on parenting and to invite speakers such as public health nurses to talk to parents; they had also established a parent library containing books on child development and related topics.)

The Percentage of Time that Teachers Spent on 'Information Sharing' with Parents

Figure 4.8 and Table 4.6 show the percentage of observed intervals that teachers spent on providing or exchanging information with parents. Teachers from the YWCA unit again demonstrated the highest level for this type of interaction with parents (head teacher, 27.1%; second teacher, 20.1%) Often, parents attended the YWCA mobile pre-school unit sessions as much for the friendly advice and concern expressed by teachers for **themselves** as for the benefits for their children. The teachers acted as resource people for the parents, putting

Figure 4.7: Percentage of total observed intervals in which teachers from each mobile unit conversed casually with parents

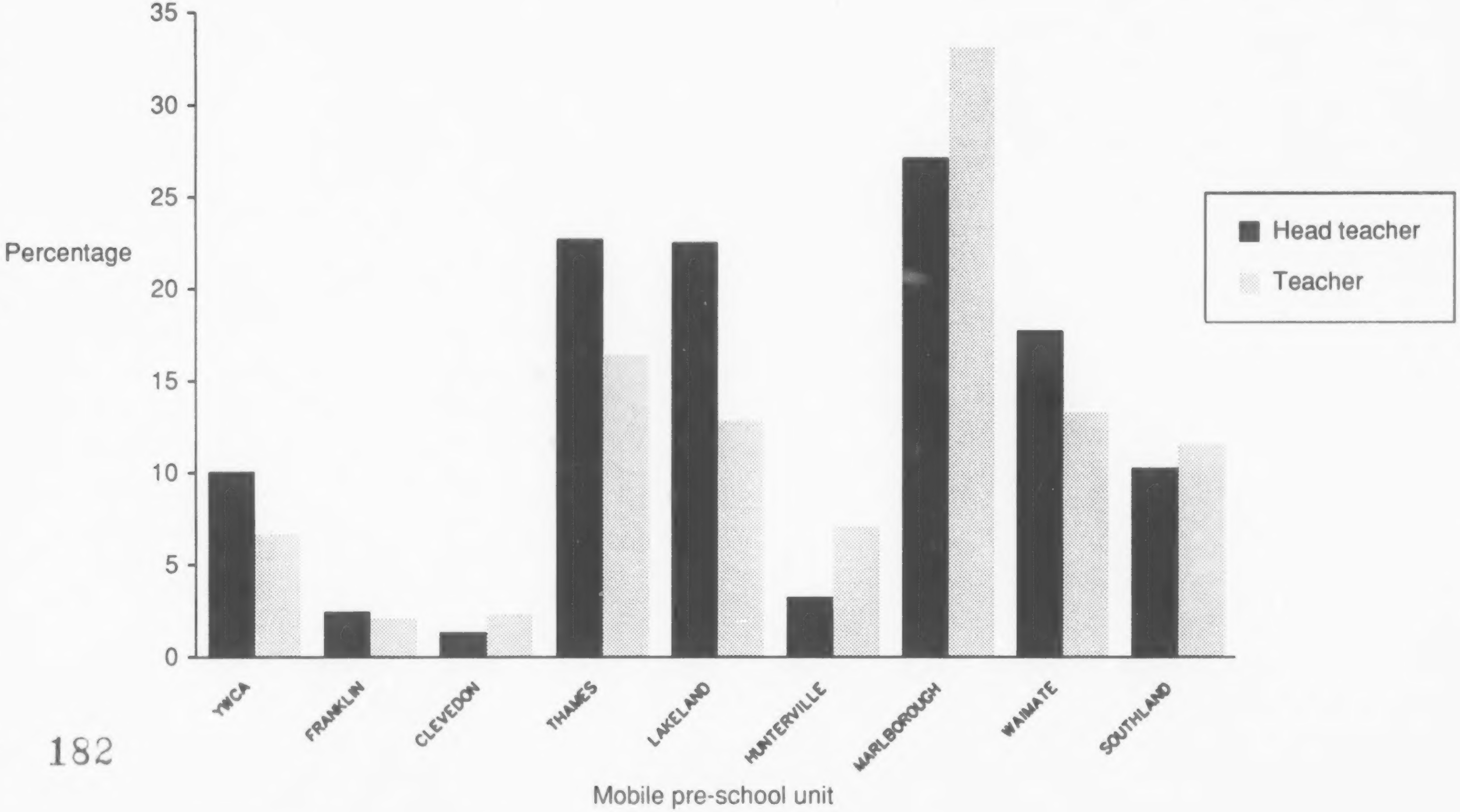
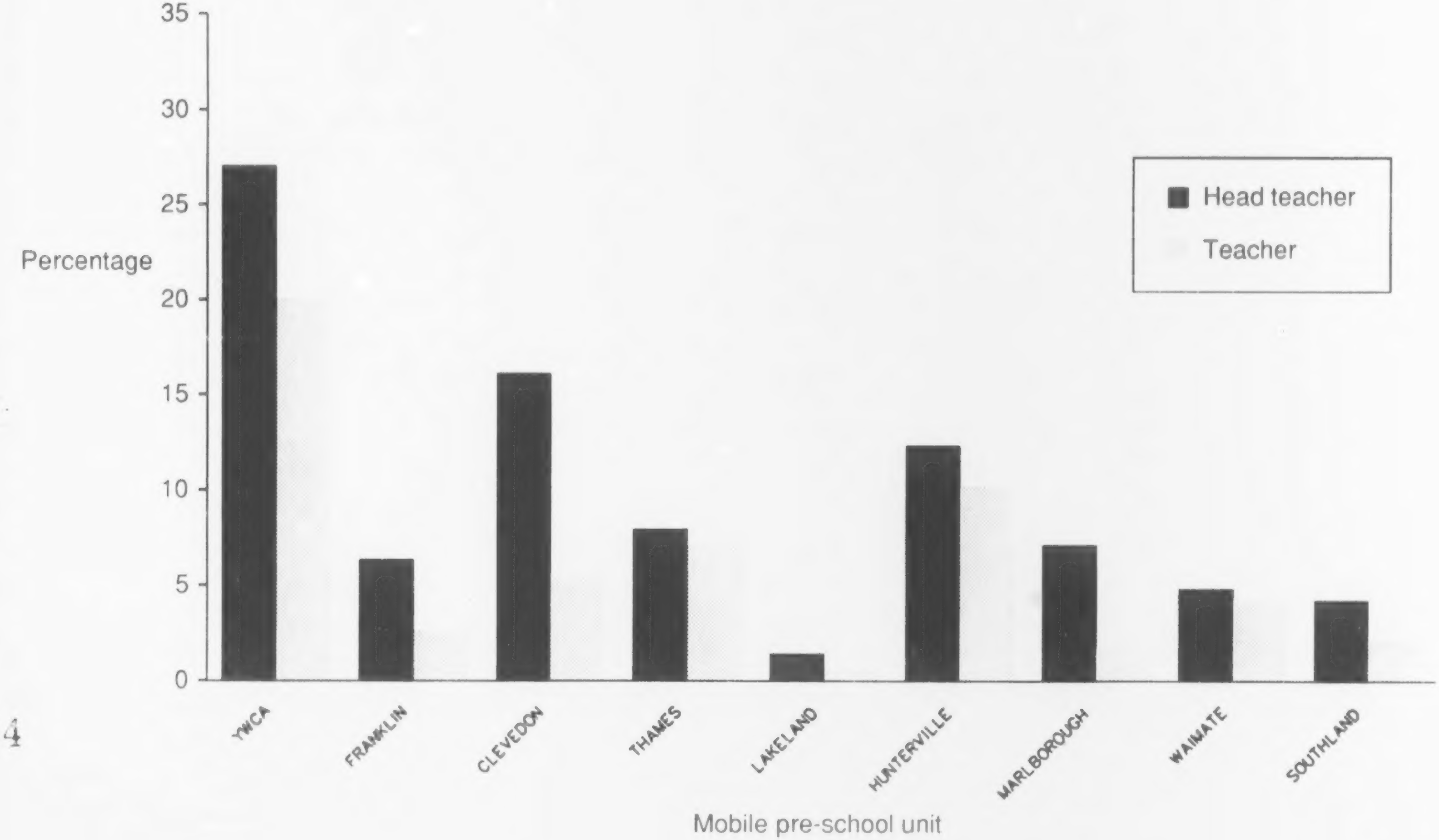


Figure 4.8: Percentage of total observed intervals in which teachers from each mobile unit shared information with parents



them in touch with other agencies if more specific aid was required, as well as running camps and workshops. The high level of information sharing with parents shown by the YWCA teachers was therefore compatible with the philosophy of the mobile unit. The YWCA teachers believed that increasing the parents' self-esteem and providing parents with alternative methods of solving conflict, in turn benefited the children.

Percentage of Observed Intervals that Teachers Spent Discussing Parents' Personal Problems with Them

Parents sometimes discussed their personal problems with the mobile pre-school unit teachers. However, in light of all the other interactions and activities taking place during sessions, the percentage of recorded time teachers spent interacting with parents in this way was very small. (This finding is compatible with data from the parent questionnaires - Chapter 5 - which indicated that while parents generally had good relationships with teachers and found them approachable and helpful they did not often consider that they discussed 'personal problems' with them except, perhaps, when these were connected with difficulties with their children. It is, however, somewhat at variance with teachers' perceptions of the extent to which they listened and/or helped parents with personal problems. Possible reasons for the apparent discrepancy have been discussed on page 225 of this report.)

Teachers from the YWCA unit exhibited the highest proportion of total observed intervals involving discussion of 'personal problems' with parents. (Such discussion usually took place during a sustained interaction between a teacher and a parent). Although the recorded time that these teachers spent with parents in this way was still very low, this did not mean that, in the course of their work over the longer term, discussion of parents' personal problems did not occur more often. The head teacher stated in the interview that they frequently spent a large part of their time with parents **outside** of sessions, following up on problems and providing advice and moral support when accompanying parents to the Department of Social Welfare or other organisations. The teachers at the YWCA unit regarded their role as resource people and facilitators of the playgroups they visited, both on matters relating to child development and in relation to parents' personal difficulties. This meant that teachers not only shared information with parents but also listened and gave advice on the problems that parents experienced.

'Personal problems' are not necessarily constant and so, although little evidence was obtained from observations[25] carried out during the fielwork periods that parents discussed their problems with teachers, this does not mean that teachers did not periodically interact with at least **some** parents in this way. From information obtained during the teacher interviews, and by other means, it was clear that at least several of the teachers certainly **perceived** that they did so: teachers from the Thames mobile pre-school unit, for instance, mentioned dealing with drug, alcohol and gang-related problems from time to time, as well as with problems experienced by single parents.

A Brief Comparison Between Present Data on Teacher-Parent Interactions and Some Previous Research Findings

Smith and Hubbard (1988a) looked at staff-parent communication in early childhood centres. They used the interval recording procedure and an observation instrument which contained precoded categories of behaviour (eg 'greetings', 'farewells', 'information sharing', 'casual conversation') identical to those used in this study. Smith and Hubbard found that staff spent an average of 15.2% of their time interacting with parents, compared to the mobile pre-school unit teachers who spent an average of 21.6% of their time in this way. Of the total time spent in interacting with parents (observed at the **beginning** of the session rather than throughout the session) staff in the previous study spent more than half (9%) in sharing or providing information; the equivalent figure for the mobile pre-school teachers was 7.9%. A more major difference was shown in the amount of time that staff involved in each study spent on casual conversation with parents: Smith and Hubbard found that teachers spent an average of 4% of their time in this way while the present study shows that teachers spent an average of 12.5% of their time in casual conversation. (It should be emphasised that these are only average figures and do not demonstrate the wide variation, as shown in Figure 4.7, found between teachers, especially those from different mobile units.)

The findings discussed above, therefore, show that although staff in Smith and Hubbard's study spent more time engaged in information sharing and less on casual conversation, the results were reversed for the mobile pre-school unit teachers. Reasons for this may be that because many parents remain throughout mobile unit sessions, instead of rushing in to drop off their child like many parents at a standard kindergarten, the necessity to exchange information with the teacher was not confined to such a short period of time and the parents had the opportunity to disseminate information amongst themselves throughout the session.

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[25] It was not always easy to observe this type of interaction and still maintain the role of unobtrusive observer. Because discussion of various problems faced by parents was often of a private nature and generally took place where the teacher and parent were least likely to be interrupted or overheard this, at times, presented some difficulties for accurately observing and recording such interactions.

Mobile pre-school unit sessions were probably also more social occasions for the majority of parents who attended than those of standard kindergartens, and teachers and parents tended to cover a wide range of topics in their discussions. The longer length of time spent by many parents at sessions gave them more opportunity (especially those parents from more isolated rural areas whose chances for social interaction were often more limited than for those living in towns) to build up friendships with other parents and with the teachers, and to talk in a relaxed and casual way.

Conversations about children (eg the activities they were involved in at sessions) often occurred between parents and staff in Smith and Hubbard's study but, as in the present study, parents said they would seldom discuss family or personal problems. Also, although many parents said they would seek child-rearing advice from teachers, some also stated that they considered it important for teachers to have their own children before they were 'qualified' to discuss the problems of bringing up young children. As mentioned previously, attitudes such as this had been experienced by some of the mobile unit teachers. One head teacher, for example, expressed the difficulty she initially felt in relating to parents (especially those who were older) when she herself was not a parent:

> **"I know it took me a long time to feel confident ...because I sort of felt, well, they would be saying 'Oh that young nipper, she doesn't know what she is talking about, she hasn't had kids.'"**

Mobile pre-school unit teachers, however, endeavoured to be accessible to parents during sessions to discuss any topic the parents desired. Furthermore, the majority of teachers (especially those at the YWCA) **actively** encouraged parents to approach them with any concerns, and to relate to them on a friendship basis.

Sustained Interactions between Parents and Teachers

As shown in Table 4.7 and Figure 4.9, all teachers observed had at least some sustained interactions with parents. ('Sustained interactions with parents', for present purposes, were those which endured for two or more observation intervals ie 30 seconds[26] or more.) Not unexpectedly, in view of other data presented above, the YWCA and Marlborough mobile pre-school unit teachers had the highest percentage of sustained interactions with parents. Although the average length of sustained interactions varied between 2.9 and 6.1 intervals, almost all teachers had a number of interactions with parents which continued for two or

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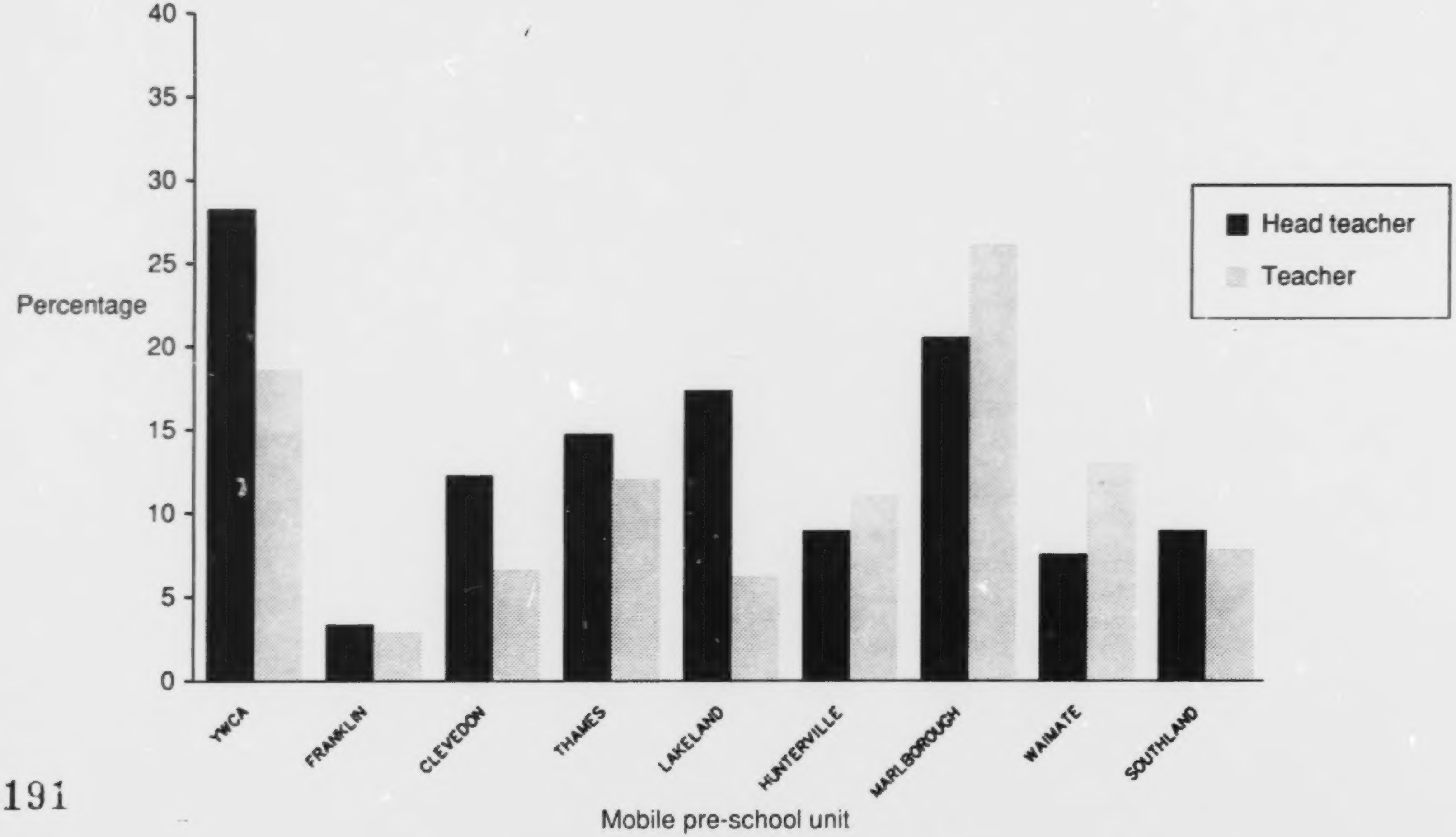
[26] As explained in footnote 24 on page 137, length of intervals in relation to sustained interactions is taken to be 15 seconds.

Table 4.7 : Summary table of teachers' sustained interactions with parents

Mobile unit/teacher	Percentage of all observed intervals which were spent in sustained interactions* with individual parents %	Total number of sustained interactions that teachers had with parents N	Mean ($\bar{x}$) length of sustained interactions $\bar{X}$	Range (ie upper and lower limits on number of intervals in sustained interactions	Number of sustained interactions that were 8 or more intervals in length (ie 2 minutes plus) N	Percentage of all sustained interactions which were 2 minutes or longer in length %
YWCA						
Head Teacher	28.3	47	4.3	2 - 16	7	14.9
Teacher	18.6	25	5.6	2 - 20	5	20.0
Franklin						
Head Teacher	3.4	7	3.0	2 - 6	-	-
Teacher	3.0	9	3.2	2 - 9	1	11.1
Clevedon						
Head Teacher	12.3	14	6.5	2 - 20	6	42.9
Teacher	6.7	10	4.8	2 - 14	2	20.0
Thames						
Head Teacher	14.8	49	3.6	2 - 15	5	10.2
Teacher	12.1	43	3.4	2 - 13	1	2.3
Lakeland						
Head Teacher	7.4	32	5.4	2 - 20	6	18.8
Teacher	6.3	23	2.9	2 - 8	2	8.7
Hunterville						
Head Teacher	9.0	27	3.5	2 - 14	2	7.4
Teacher	11.1	35	3.1	2 - 10	2	5.7
Marlborough						
Head Teacher	20.6	55	4.6	2 - 17	6	10.9
Teacher	26.2	50	6.1	2 - 20	15	30.0
Waimate						
Head Teacher	13.1	41	3.4	2 - 20	2	4.9
Teacher	7.6	26	3.2	2 - 10	1	3.8
Southland						
Head Teacher	9.0	23	4.8	2 - 15	4	17.4
Teacher	7.9	26	3.4	2 - 9	1	3.8

* 'Sustained interactions' were interactions between a teacher and an individual parent which endured for two or more consecutive observed intervals. Because of the procedure which the observers followed of observing teachers alternately for a maximum period of 5 minutes - or 20 intervals - each time, sustained interactions could never be recorded as longer than 20 intervals. 'Sustained interactions' could contain any of the categories of behaviour, listed in Table 2.1,relating to parents.

Figure 4.9: Percentage of total observed intervals that teachers from each mobile unit spent in sustained one-to-one interactions with parents



more minutes. Furthermore, although it was not possible to formally record this, it was apparent during the observation periods at each mobile unit, that teachers frequently interacted with the **same** parent(s) on a number of different occasions throughout a session.

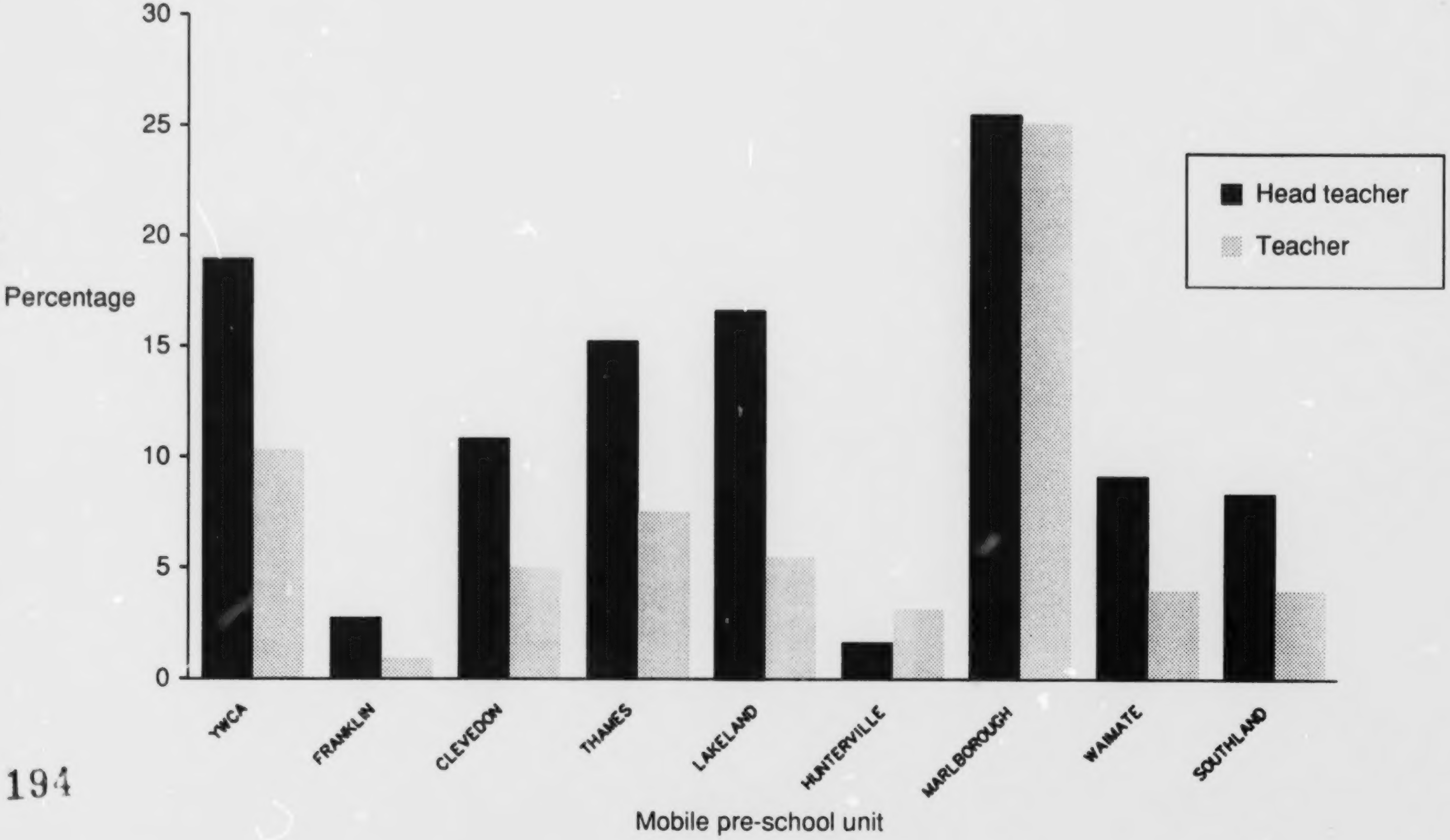
Not only were mobile pre-school unit teachers often able to have sustained interactions with parents but, as shown in Figure 4.10, they were also not infrequently able to talk exclusively to parents during such interactions - ie teachers were able to engage in extended verbal interactions with parents without having to be simultaneously involved in other activities, such as supervising, facilitating play, or caregiving of the environment. In this way, the parent had the teacher's whole attention throughout the interaction, and both parties were undisturbed by interruptions. (This situation would probably be most unlikely in a standard kindergarten where the teachers generally have entire responsibility for a large number of children, a responsibility which requires them to keep a constant eye on the group even when talking to a parent. The smaller group size of many mobile groups and/or the higher number of parents who remain throughout sessions - which result in more favourable teacher-child ratios - probably explains why mobile unit teachers were able to do this.) The nature of the interactions were such that the teacher usually talked on a 'one-to-one' basis with the parent.

The teachers at the Marlborough unit spent most of their conversations with parents talking exclusively to them; the YWCA and Thames teachers also spent a high percentage of their time conversing with parents in this way. The YWCA unit's philosophy of 'empowering women' encouraged teachers to spend time working with the mothers, and this helps account for the large percentage of time spent in intensive interactions with individual parents.

Teachers' Interactions with Parents : A Summary

The teachers on the mobile pre-school units appeared to have responsibilities that went beyond those of early childhood education and care ie interactions with parents were considered by teachers to be an important part of their work. The data presented in this chapter (and in Chapter 3) bear out the level of importance that most of the teachers placed on this aspect of their work. (Data which are presented in Chapter 5 also reveal that most parents felt that they had positive relationships with teachers.) The characteristics of mobile pre-school units which separate them from standard kindergartens both created the opportunities and revealed the need for parents to meet and talk with teachers. The nature of the communities which the mobile units served, and the nature of the mobile units themselves, meant that some teachers were able to interact with **more** parents more often - or at least more **intensively** - than perhaps teachers in standard kindergartens are able to do. In many cases, it was more practicable for parents to remain at mobile pre-school unit

Figure 4.10: Percentage of total observed intervals that teachers from each mobile unit spent talking exclusively to parents



sessions, rather than drive long distances home, only to come back to the venue again later to pick up their children. Continual parent presence in many of the mobile pre-school groups gave teachers greater opportunities to form close relationships with parents. The numbers of children attending sessions were usually considerably smaller than those in a standard kindergarten, and thus teachers were able to spend more time with both parents and children - although this was countered to some extent by the relative infrequency of sessions held for the various mobile groups. (The very infrequency of sessions, however, may have resulted in interactions being more intensive: everyday contact could perhaps be taken more for granted.) Parents in isolated rural areas enjoyed the chance to meet with other parents and to talk to staff about child rearing and other matters. At the Hunterville and Waimate units, for example, the weekly pre-school sessions were considered by parents and children to be an 'occasion', for which parents rostered themselves specially for the baking of the formal morning teas that they liked to put on. In this way, the unit provided a legitimate reason for country women to have a break in their busy but often isolated lifestyles and to have some much needed contact with others.

Conclusions

Results have shown that mobile pre-school unit teachers spent the greatest amount of their time (an average of around 50% of observed intervals) in facilitating play with children. This seemed largely to have been possible because of the relatively small numbers of children at many of the groups visited by mobile pre-school units and/or the presence of parents who were often able to relieve teachers of much of the responsibility for the supervision and caregiving of children, and for many housekeeping tasks as well. Group size and parental input probably also contributed significantly to the finding that teachers overall not only demonstrated a high level of verbal interactions with children (including verbal initiation, verbal responding, directive and expository statements) but also showed that they were able to have interactions with individual children that endured over several intervals and not infrequently involved conversation.

Of particular note was the finding that mobile unit teachers spent an average of around 10% of observed intervals on talking exclusively to parents (ie without being interrupted by other things going on in the pre-school). This is something that is unlikely to occur at such a level in standard kindergartens where group size is generally larger and fewer parents tend to remain throughout sessions to assist the teachers.

Not unexpectedly, there were plenty of individual differences between teachers in how they spent their time during sessions. Explanations for such differences clearly have to take into account the more obvious variables of individual teacher style and philosophy, but other factors, such as the way teachers at the same unit divided duties and responsibilities between them, also played a part. The different characteristics of mobile units, often a result of the particular communities being served, or of certain restrictions such as how often the units were able to visit groups each week, also undoubtedly had an influence on the way teachers interacted with parents and children during sessions.

Table 4.8: Teacher behaviours recorded during the observation period at the YWCA mobile pre-school unit

		YWCA MPSU			
		Recorded behaviours			
		Head Teacher		Teacher	
Behaviours which occurred during observed intervals		N*	%†	N	%
Teacher-Child Interactions					
Verbal Initiation	V ->	170	23.6	218	28.7
Direction	D	75	10.4	48	6.3
Verbal Response	V <-	103	14.3	128	16.8
Conversation	C	6	0.8	9	1.2
Exposition	E	32	4.4	28	3.7
Non-verbal Initiation	N ->	152	21.1	135	17.8
Non-verbal Response	N <-	30	4.2	32	4.2
Socioemotional Positive	S+	55	7.6	62	8.2
Socioemotional Negative	S-	0	0	2	0.3
Teacher-Parent Interactions					
Greetings/Farewells	G or F	5	0.7	5	0.7
Information Sharing	I	195	27.1	153	20.1
Casual Conversation	Ca	73	10.1	51	6.7
Personal Problems	Pp	10	1.4	20	2.6
Teacher-Visitor Interactions					
Greetings/Farewells	G or F	0	0.0	1	0.1
Information Sharing	I	34	4.7	10	1.3
Casual Conversation	Ca	1	0.1	0	0
Teacher-Teacher Interactions		30	4.2	25	3.3
Major activities occurring during observed intervals		N	%#	N	%
Caregiving Child	CC	23	3.2	23	3.0
Caregiving Environment	CE	86	11.9	103	13.6
Facilitating Play	FP	373	51.8	476	62.6
Supervisory	S	40	5.6	21	2.8
Leading a Group Activity	G	28	3.9	40	5.3
Talking to Parents	P	137	19.0	79	10.4
Talking to Visitors	V	32	4.4	8	1.1
Talking to Teachers	T	1	0.1	10	1.3
Total Intervals Observed		720		760	

* Each type of behaviour was recorded only once for each interval.

† Percentages, for each type of behaviour, are calculated as a proportion of the total number of intervals observed and not as a proportion of the total number of behaviours. Percentages add to more than 100% as more than one behaviour could occur during a given interval.

# As only one activity (ie the activity that predominated) was recorded for each interval, percentages in this case add to 100%.

Figure 4.11: Proportion of observed intervals in which each of various teacher behaviours occurred: the head teacher, YWCA MPSU

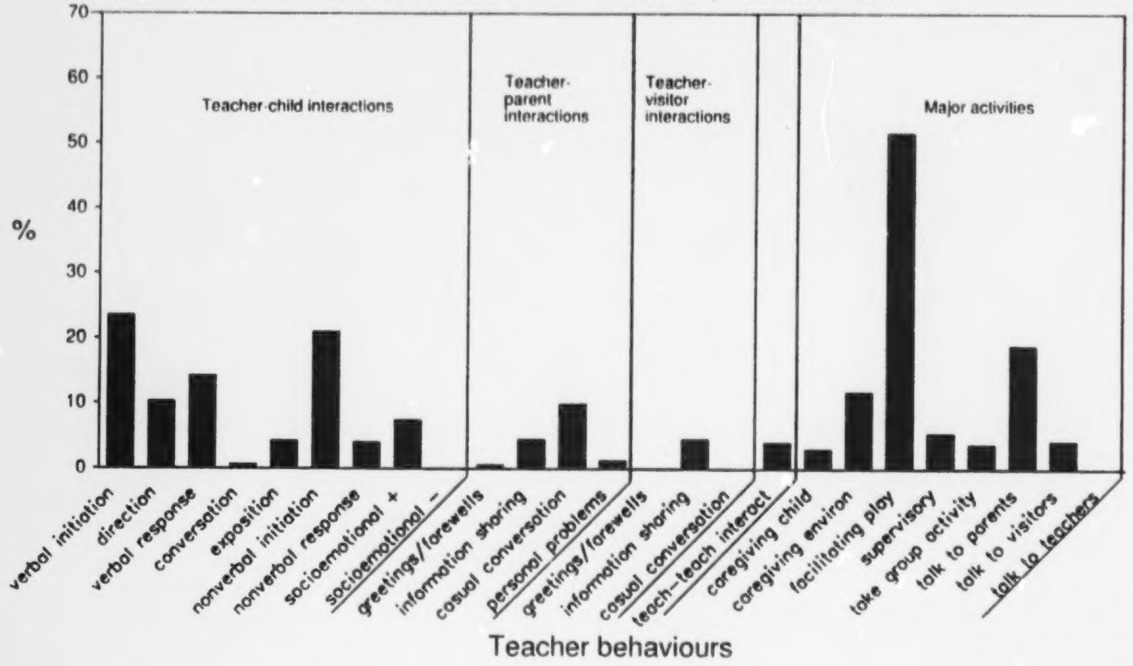


Figure 4.12: Proportion of observed intervals in which each of various teacher behaviours occurred: the second teacher, YWCA MPSU

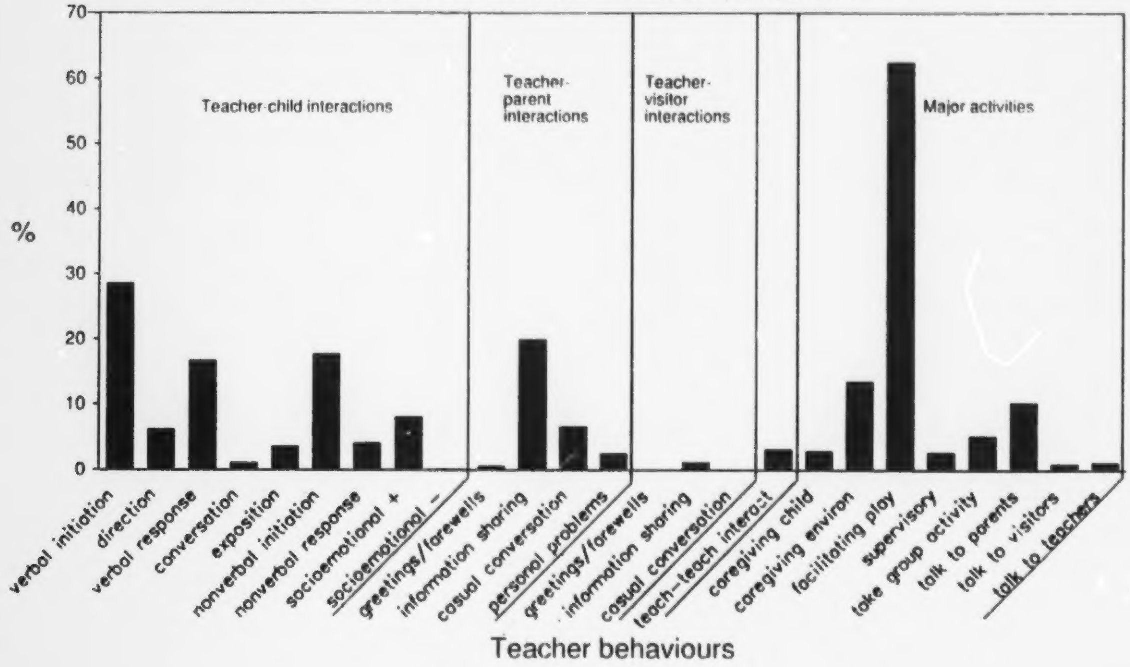


Table 4.9: Teacher behaviours recorded during the observation period at the Franklin mobile pre-school unit

		FRANKLIN MPSU			
		Recorded behaviours			
		Head Teacher		Teacher	
Behaviours which occurred during observed intervals		N*	%†	N	%
Teacher-Child Interactions					
Verbal Initiation	V ->	193	21.9	248	25.9
Direction	D	112	12.7	107	11.2
Verbal Response	V <-	125	14.2	177	18.5
Conversation	C	4	0.5	14	1.5
Exposition	E	35	4.0	84	8.8
Non-verbal Initiation	N ->	198	22.5	241	25.2
Non-verbal Response	N <-	31	3.5	55	5.8
Socioemotional Positive	S+	43	4.9	53	5.5
Socioemotional Negative	S-	2	0.2	0	0
Teacher-Parent Interactions					
Greetings/Farewells	G or F	6	0.7	0	0
Information Sharing	I	56	6.4	26	2.7
Casual Conversation	Ca	22	2.5	20	2.1
Personal Problems	Pp	2	0.2	0	0
Teacher-Visitor Interactions					
Greetings/Farewells	G or F	0	0	0	0
Information Sharing	I	0	0	0	0
Casual Conversation	Ca	0	0	0	0
Teacher-Teacher Interactions		42	4.8	27	2.8
Major activities occurring during observed intervals		N	%#	N	%
Caregiving Child	CC	4	0.5	2	0.2
Caregiving Environment	CE	221	25.1	109	11.4
Facilitating Play	FP	503	57.2	601	62.9
Supervisory	S	94	10.7	78	8.2
Leading a Group Activity	G	33	3.8	153	16.0
Talking to Parents	P	25	2.8	10	1.0
Talking to Visitors	V	0	0	0	0
Talking to Teachers	T	0	0	2	0.2
Total Intervals Observed		880		956	

*, †, # : refer to footnotes in Table 4.8 above

Figure 4.13: Proportion of observed intervals in which each of various teacher behaviours occurred: the head teacher, Franklin MPSU

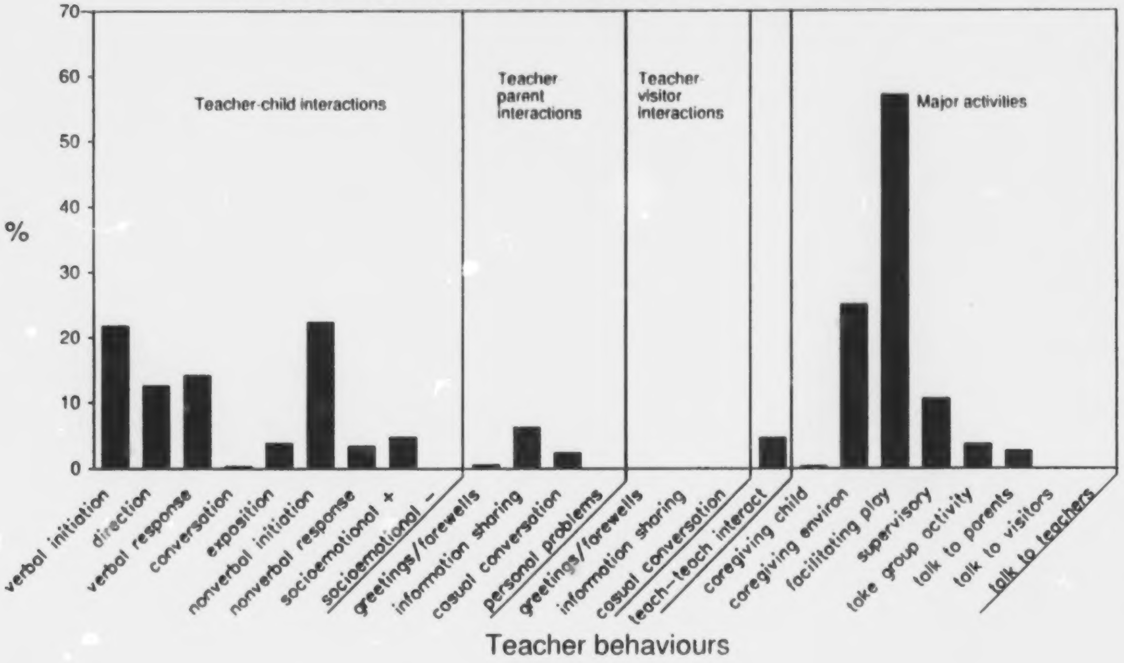


Figure 4.14: Proportion of observed intervals in which each of various teacher behaviours occurred: the second teacher, Franklin MPSU

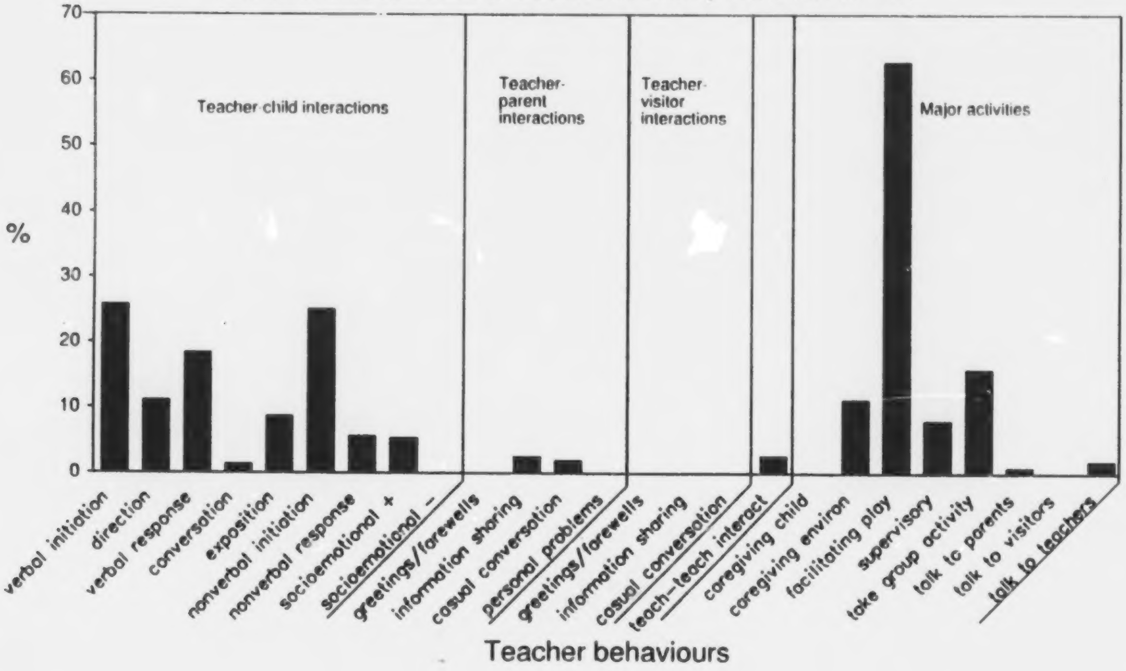


Table 4.10: Teacher behaviours recorded during the observation period at the Clevedon mobile pre-school unit

		CLEVEDON MPSU			
		Recorded behaviours			
		Head Teacher		Teacher	
Behaviours which occurred during observed intervals		N*	%†	N	%
Teacher-Child Interactions					
Verbal Initiation	V ->	266	35.9	242	33.6
Direction	D	84	11.4	59	8.2
Verbal Response	V <-	203	27.4	161	22.4
Conversation	C	29	3.9	41	5.7
Exposition	E	44	5.9	47	6.5
Non-verbal Initiation	N ->	150	20.3	125	17.4
Non-verbal Response	N <-	56	7.6	43	6.0
Socioemotional Positive	S+	55	7.4	78	10.8
Socioemotional Negative	S-	0	0	0	0
Teacher-Parent Interactions					
Greetings/Farewells	G or F	5	0.7	3	0.4
Information Sharing	I	120	16.2	40	5.6
Casual Conversation	Ca	10	1.4	17	2.4
Personal Problems	Pp	0	0	5	0.7
Teacher-Visitor Interactions					
Greetings/Farewells	G or F	0	0	0	0
Information Sharing	I	1	0.1	3	0.4
Casual Conversation	Ca	0	0	0	0
Teacher-Teacher Interactions		27	3.6	22	3.1
Major activities occurring during observed intervals		N	%#	N	%
Caregiving Child	CC	8	1.1	4	0.6
Caregiving Environment	CE	79	10.7	77	10.7
Facilitating Play	FP	399	53.9	437	60.7
Supervisory	S	28	3.8	74	10.3
Leading a Group Activity	G	134	18.1	79	11.0
Talking to Parents	P	81	10.9	37	5.1
Talking to Visitors	V	0	0	0	0
Talking to Teachers	T	10	1.4	12	1.7
Total Intervals Observed		740		720	

*, †, # : refer to footnotes in table 4.8 above.

Figure 4.15: Proportion of observed intervals in which each of various teacher behaviours occurred: the head teacher, Clevedon MPSU

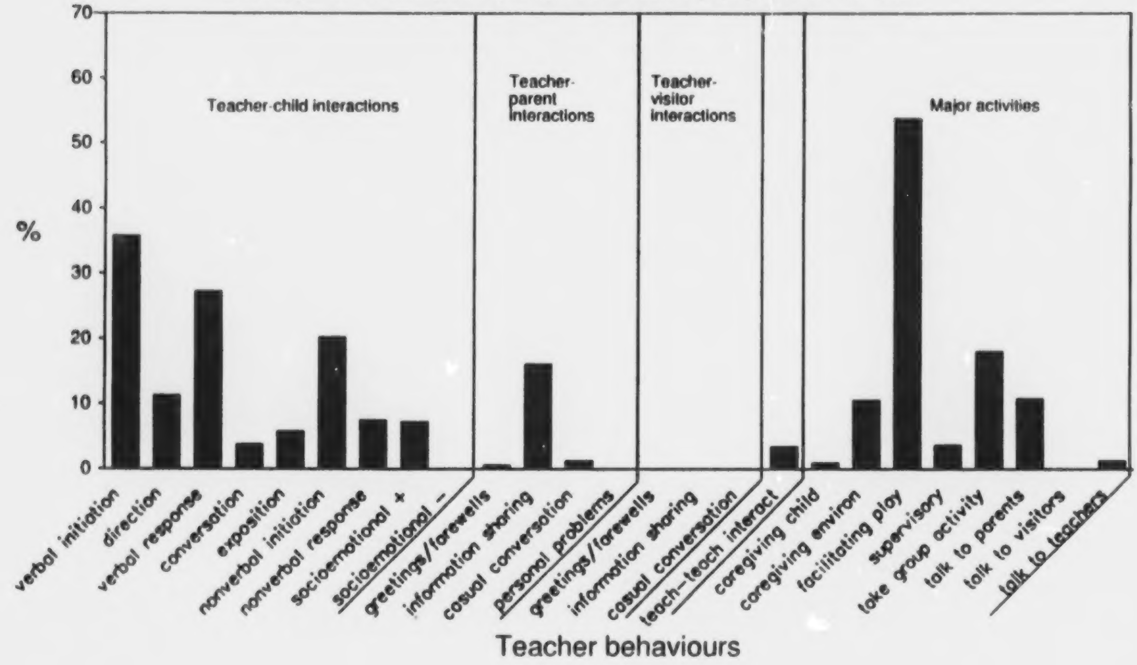


Figure 4.16: Proportion of observed intervals in which each of various teacher behaviours occurred: the second teacher, Clevedon MPSU

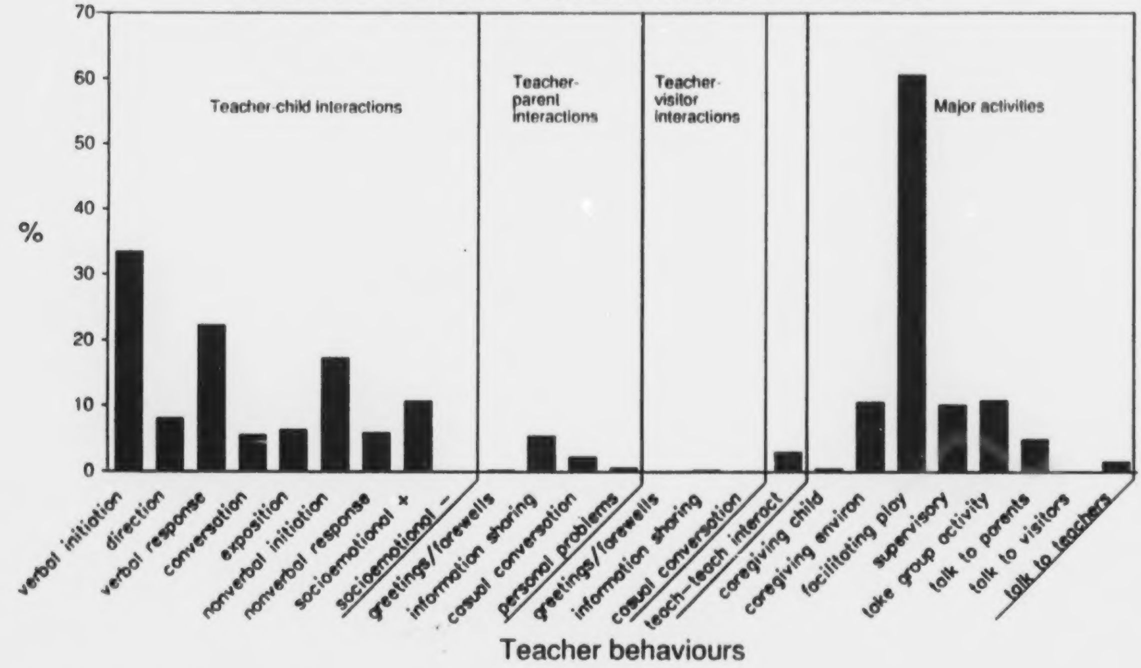


Table 4.11: Teacher behaviours recorded during the observation period at the Thames mobile pre-school unit

		THAMES			
		Recorded behaviours			
		Head Teacher		Teacher	
Behaviours which occurred during observed intervals		N*	%†	N	%
Teacher-Child Interactions					
Verbal Initiation	V ->	382	32.4	541	45.1
Direction	D	103	8.7	241	20.1
Verbal Response	V <-	179	15.2	180	15.0
Conversation	C	59	5.0	15	1.3
Exposition	E	130	11.0	218	18.2
Non-verbal Initiation	N ->	39	3.3	63	5.3
Non-verbal Response	N <-	36	3.1	45	3.8
Socioemotional Positive	S+	251	21.3	211	17.6
Socioemotional Negative	S-	0	0	3	0.3
Teacher-Parent Interactions					
Greetings/Farewells	G or F	19	1.6	9	0.8
Information Sharing	I	94	8.0	86	7.2
Casual Conversation	Ca	269	22.8	198	16.5
Personal Problems	Pp	0	0	0	0
Teacher-Visitor Interactions					
Greetings/Farewells	G or F	0	0	0	0
Information Sharing	I	0	0	0	0
Casual Conversation	Ca	0	0	0	0
Teacher-Teacher Interactions		59	5.0	61	5.1
Major activities occurring during observed intervals		N	%#	N	%
Caregiving Child	CC	2	0.2	20	1.7
Caregiving Environment	CE	298	25.3	257	21.4
Facilitating Play	FP	487	41.3	686	57.2
Supervisory	S	104	8.8	93	7.8
Leading a Group Activity	G	96	8.1	45	3.8
Talking to Parents	P	180	15.3	91	7.6
Talking to Visitors	V	0	0	0	0
Talking to Teachers	T	13	1.1	8	0.7
Total Intervals Observed		1180		1200	

*, †, # : refer to footnotes in Table 4.8 above

Figure 4.17: Proportion of observed intervals in which each of various teacher behaviours occurred: the head teacher, Thames MPSU

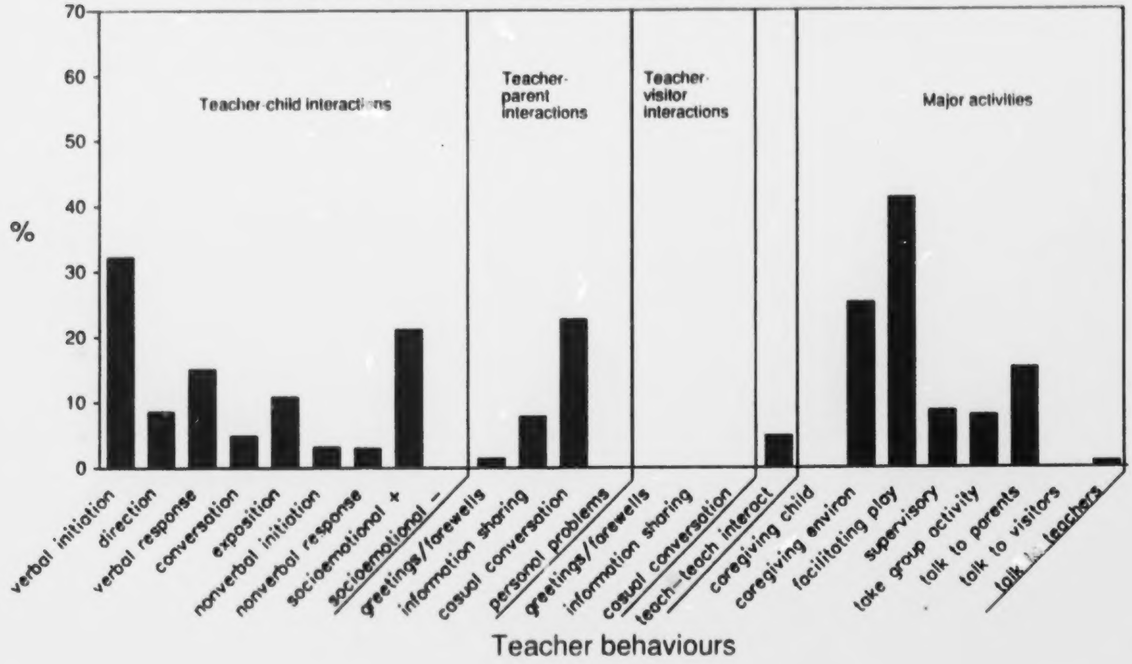


Figure 4.18: Proportion of observed intervals in which each of various teacher behaviours occurred: the second teacher, Thames MPSU

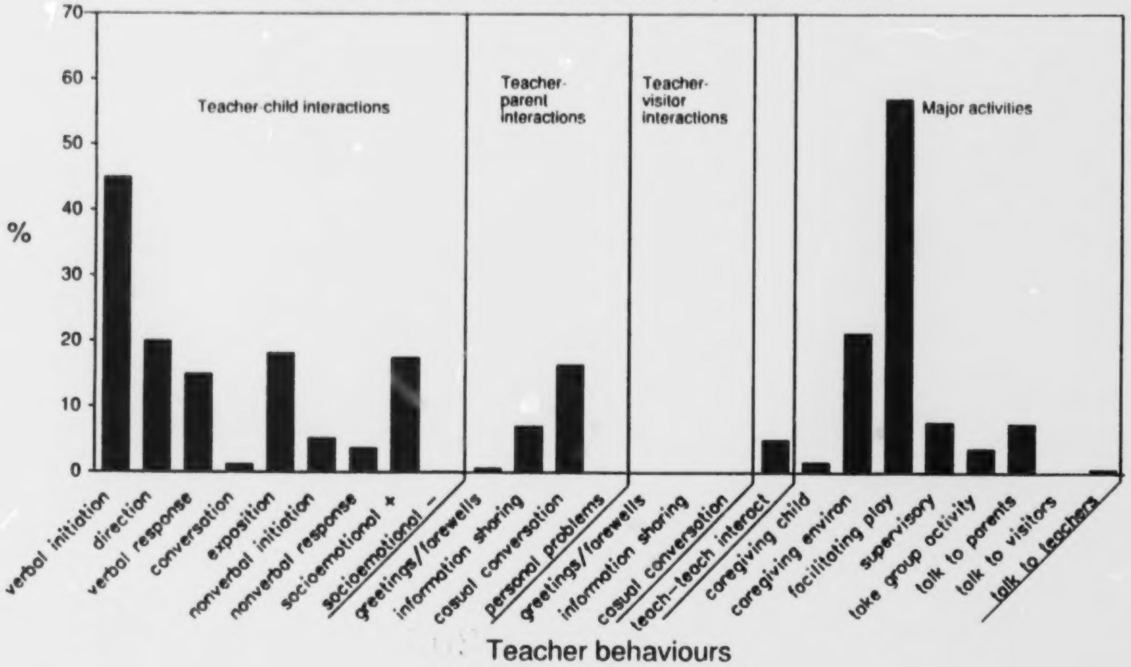


Table 4.12: Teacher behaviours recorded during the observation period at the Lakeland mobile pre-school unit

		LAKELAND MPSU			
		Recorded behaviours			
		Head Teacher		Teacher	
Behaviours which occurred during observed intervals		N*	%†	N	%
Teacher-Child Interactions					
Verbal Initiation	V ->	422	42.2	473	44.6
Direction	D	95	9.5	144	13.6
Verbal Response	V <-	173	17.3	251	23.7
Conversation	C	66	6.6	56	5.3
Exposition	E	135	13.5	144	13.6
Non-verbal Initiation	N ->	37	3.7	41	3.9
Non-verbal Response	N <-	31	3.1	31	2.9
Socioemotional Positive	S+	201	20.1	168	15.8
Socioemotional Negative	S-	0	0	0	0
Teacher-Parent Interactions					
Greetings/Farewells	G or F	15	1.5	8	0.8
Information Sharing	I	15	1.5	7	0.7
Casual Conversation	Ca	226	22.6	137	12.9
Personal Problems	Pp	0	0	0	0
Teacher-Visitor Interactions					
Greetings/Farewells	G or F	0	0	0	0
Information Sharing	I	0	0	0	0
Casual Conversation	Ca	14	1.4	0	0
Teacher-Teacher Interactions		50	5.0	65	6.1
Major activities occurring during observed intervals		N	%#	N	%
Caregiving Child	CC	10	1.0	19	1.8
Caregiving Environment	CE	115	11.5	135	12.7
Facilitating Play	FP	625	62.5	737	69.5
Supervisory	S	18	1.8	78	7.4
Leading a Group Activity	G	51	5.1	15	1.4
Talking to Parents	P	167	16.7	58	5.5
Talking to Visitors	V	8	0.8	0	0
Talking to Teachers	T	6	0.6	18	1.7
Total Intervals Observed		1000		1060	

*,†,# : Refer to footnotes in Table 5.8 above.

Figure 4.19: Proportion of observed intervals in which each of various teacher behaviours occurred: the head teacher, Lakeland MPSU

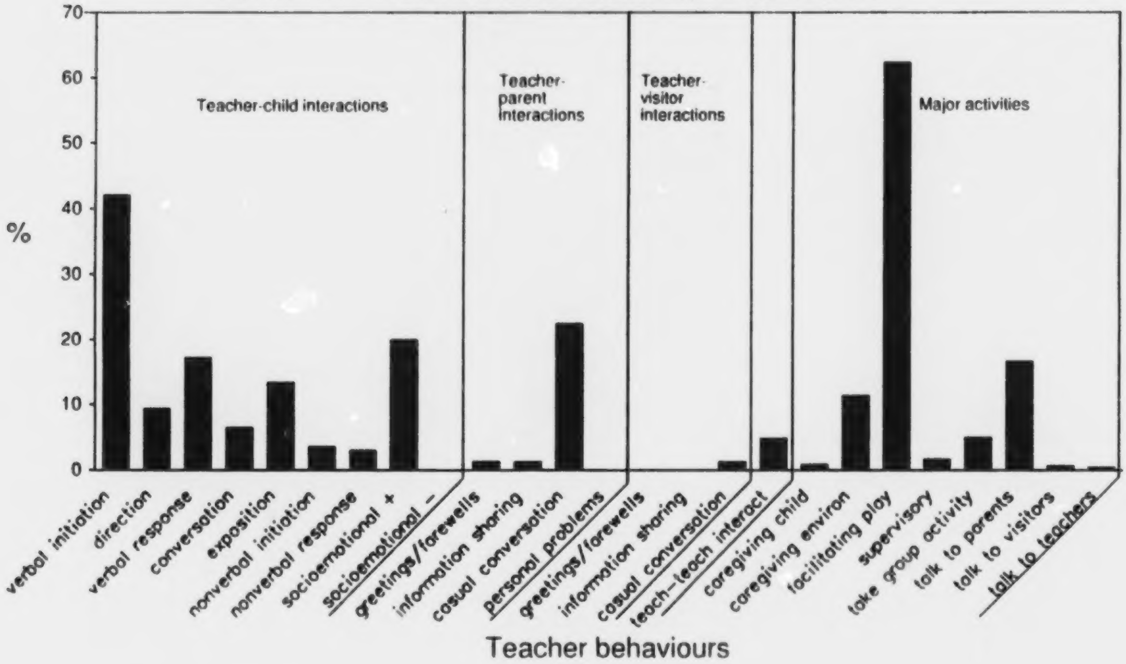


Figure 4.20: Proportion of observed intervals in which each of various teacher behaviours occurred: the second teacher, Lakeland MPSU

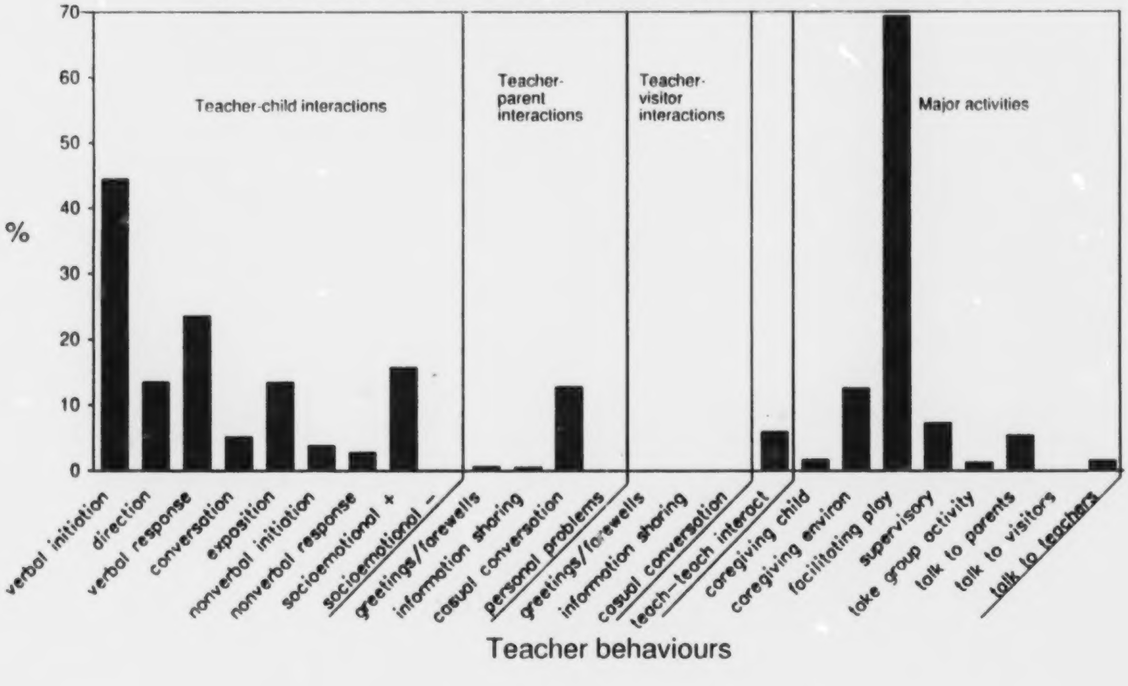


Table 4.13: Teacher behaviours recorded during the observation period at the Hunterville mobile pre-school unit

		HUNTERVILLE MPSU			
		Recorded behaviours			
		Head Teacher		Teacher	
Behaviours which occurred during observed intervals		N*	%†	N	%
Teacher-Child Interactions					
Verbal Initiation	V ->	266	25.6	275	27.7
Direction	D	180	17.3	210	21.1
Verbal Response	V <-	219	21.1	179	18.0
Conversation	C	26	2.5	9	0.9
Exposition	E	45	4.3	99	10.0
Non-verbal Initiation	N ->	219	21.1	279	28.1
Non-verbal Response	N <-	55	5.3	48	4.8
Socioemotional Positive	S+	110	10.6	107	10.8
Socioemotional Negative	S-	1	0.1	0	0
Teacher-Parent interactions					
Greetings/Farewells	G or F	4	0.4	1	0.1
Information Sharing	I	129	12.4	101	10.2
Casual Conversation	Ca	34	3.3	71	7.1
Personal Problems	Pp	0	0	1	0.1
Teacher-Visitor Interactions					
Greetings/Farewells	G or F	0	0	0	0
Information Sharing	I	24	2.3	5	0.5
Casual Conversation	Ca	0	0	0	0
Teacher-Teacher Interactions		23	2.2	53	5.3
Major activities occurring during observed intervals		N	%#	N	%
Caregiving Child	CC	47	4.5	13	1.3
Caregiving Environment	CE	186	17.9	151	15.2
Facilitating Play	FP	567	54.5	600	60.4
Supervisory	S	63	6.1	81	8.1
Leading a Group Activity	G	143	13.8	105	10.6
Talking to Parents	P	18	1.7	32	3.2
Talking to Visitors	V	16	1.5	4	0.4
Talking to Teachers	T	0	0	8	0.8
Total Intervals Observed		1040		994	

*, †, #: Refer to footnotes in Table 4.8 above.

Figure 4.21: Proportion of observed intervals in which each of various teacher behaviours occurred: the head teacher, Hunterville MPSU

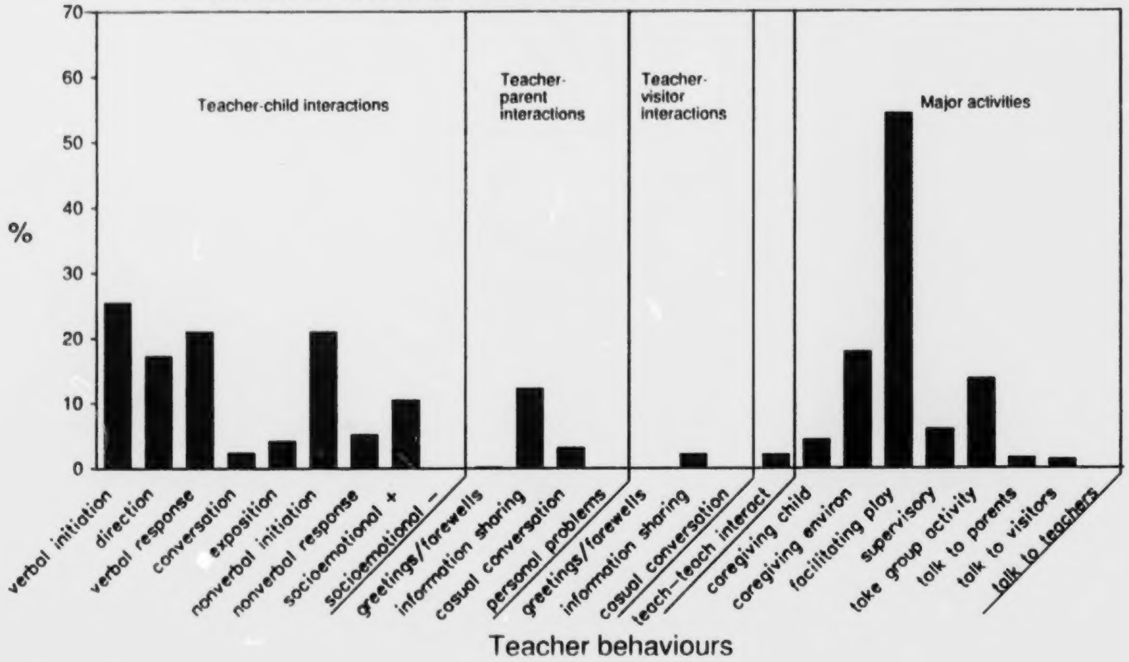


Figure 4.22: Proportion of observed intervals in which each of various teacher behaviours occurred: the second teacher, Hunterville MPSU

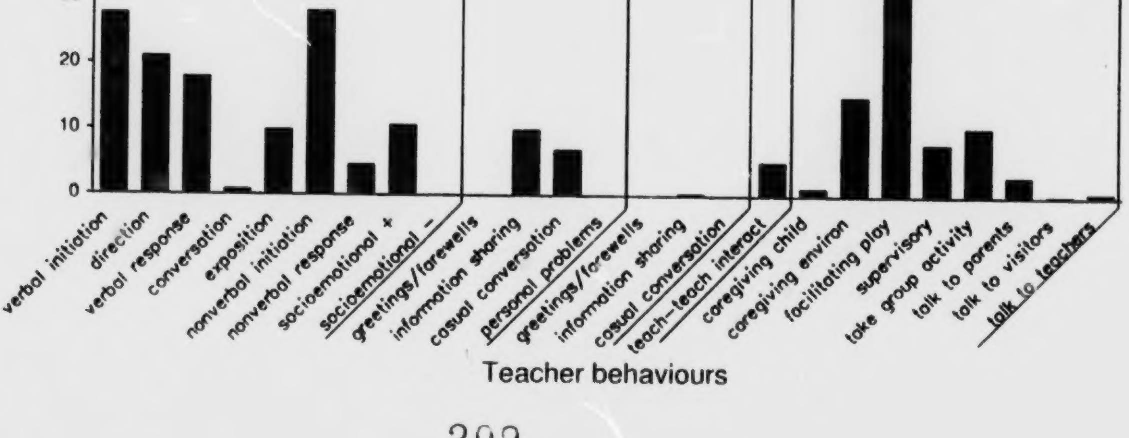


Table 4.14: Teacher behaviours recorded during the observation period at the Marlborough mobile pre-school unit

		MARLBOROUGH MPSU			
		Recorded behaviours			
		Head Teacher		Teacher	
Behaviours which occurred during observed intervals		N*	%†	N	%
Teacher-Child Interactions					
Verbal Initiation	V ->	465	37.5	362	31.2
Direction	D	200	16.1	174	15.0
Verbal Response	V <-	139	11.2	151	13.0
Conversation	C	42	3.4	53	4.6
Exposition	E	130	10.5	167	14.4
Non-verbal Initiation	N ->	65	5.2	48	4.1
Non-verbal Response	N <-	28	2.3	20	1.7
Socioemotional Positive	S+	241	19.4	215	18.5
Socioemotional Negative	S-	0	0	0	0
Teacher-Parent Interactions					
Greetings/Farewells	G or F	5	0.4	6	0.5
Information Sharing	I	89	7.2	21	1.8
Casual Conversation	Ca	344	27.7	385	33.2
Personal Problems	Pp	7	0.6	0	0
Teacher-Visitor Interactions					
Greetings/Farewells	G or F	0	0	0	0
Information Sharing	I	13	1.0	0	0
Casual Conversation	Ca	3	0.2	11	0.9
Teacher-Teacher Interactions		37	3.0	32	2.8
Major activities occurring during observed intervals		N	% #	N	%
Caregiving Child	CC	36	2.9	16	1.4
Caregiving Environment	CE	220	17.7	189	16.3
Facilitating Play	FP	402	32.4	437	37.7
Supervisory	S	82	6.6	73	6.3
Leading a Group Activity	G	152	12.3	135	11.6
Talking to Parents	P	318	25.6	292	25.2
Talking to Visitors	V	16	1.3	11	0.9
Talking to Teachers	T	14	1.1	7	0.6
Total Intervals Observed		1240		1160	

*, †, # : Refer to footnotes in Table 4.8 above.

Figure 4.23: Proportion of observed intervals in which each of various teacher behaviours occurred: the head teacher, Marlborough MPSU

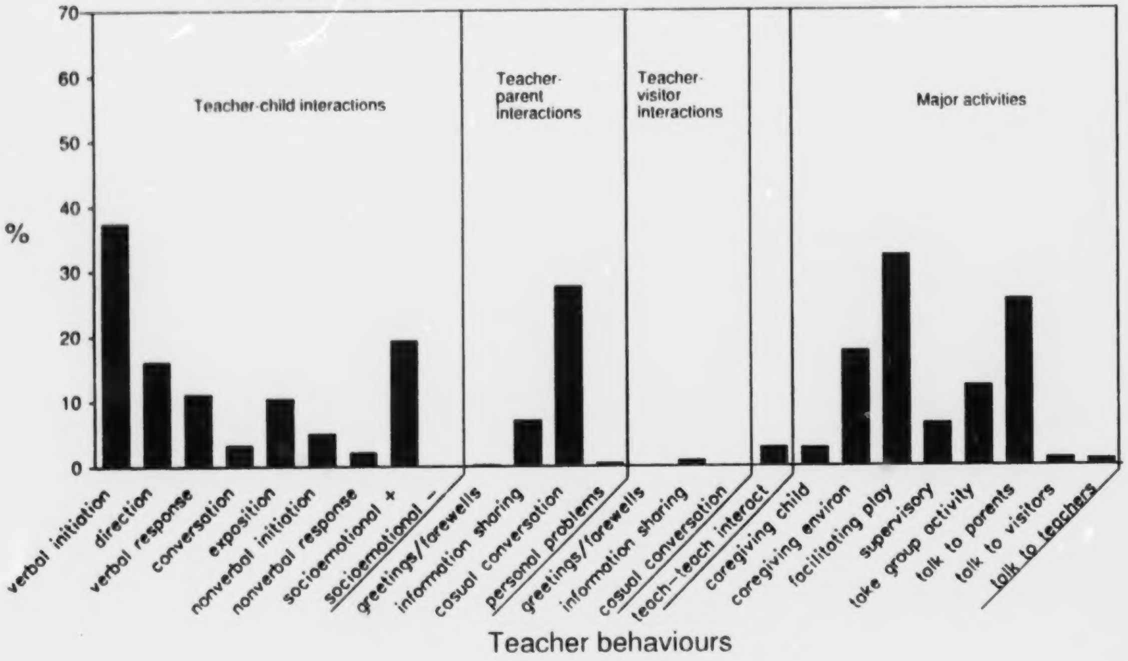


Figure 4.24: Proportion of observed intervals in which each of various teacher behaviours occurred: the second teacher, Marlborough MPSU

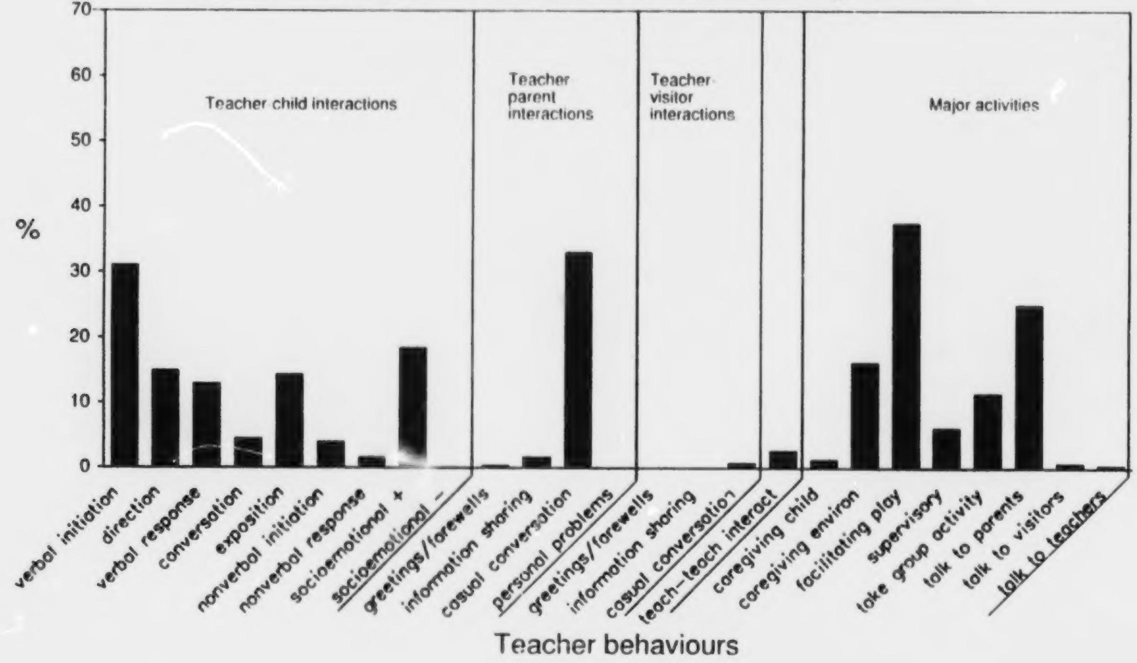


Table 4.15: Teacher behaviours recorded during the observation period at the Waimate mobile pre-school unit

		WAIMATE MPSU			
		Recorded behaviours			
		Head Teacher		Teacher	
Behaviours which occurred during observed intervals		N	%	N	%
Teacher-Child Interactions					
Verbal Initiation	V ->	539	50.8	482	43.8
Direction	D	272	25.7	198	18.0
Verbal Response	V <-	252	23.8	239	21.7
Conversation	C	50	4.7	71	6.5
Exposition	E	168	15.8	111	10.1
Non-verbal Initiation	N ->	32	3.0	63	5.7
Non-verbal Response	N <-	33	3.1	31	2.8
Socioemotional Positive	S+	273	25.8	299	27.2
Socioemotional Negative	S-	2	0.2	0	0
Teacher-Parent Interactions					
Greetings/Farewells	G or F	7	0.7	8	0.7
Information Sharing	I	52	4.9	47	4.3
Casual Conversation	Ca	189	17.8	146	13.3
Personal Problems	Pp	22	2.1	0	0
Teacher-Visitor Interactions					
Greetings/Farewells	G or F	0	0	0	0
Information Sharing	I	0	0	0	0
Casual Conversation	Ca	0	0	0	0
Teacher-Teacher Interactions		17	1.6	31	2.8
Major activities occurring during observed intervals		N	%#	N	%
Caregiving Child	CC	25	2.4	32	2.9
Caregiving Environment	CE	64	6.0	238	21.6
Facilitating Play	FP	510	48.1	453	41.2
Supervisory	S	126	11.9	100	9.1
Leading a Group Activity	G	237	22.4	226	20.5
Talking to Parents	P	98	9.2	44	4.0
Talking to Visitors	V	0	0	0	0
Talking to Teachers	T	0	0	7	0.6
Total Intervals Observed		1060		1100	

*, †, # : Refer to footnotes in Table 4.8 above.

Figure 4.25: Proportion of observed intervals in which each of various teacher behaviours occurred: the head teacher, Waimate MPSU

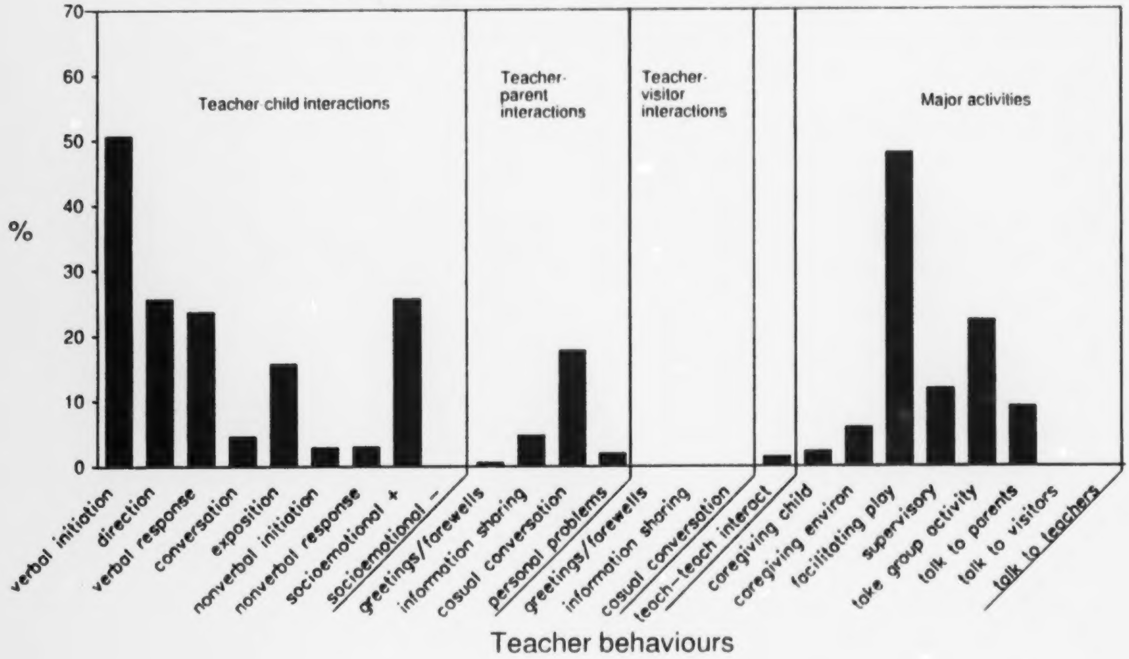


Figure 4.26: Proportion of observed intervals in which each of various teacher behaviours occurred: the second teacher, Waimate MPSU

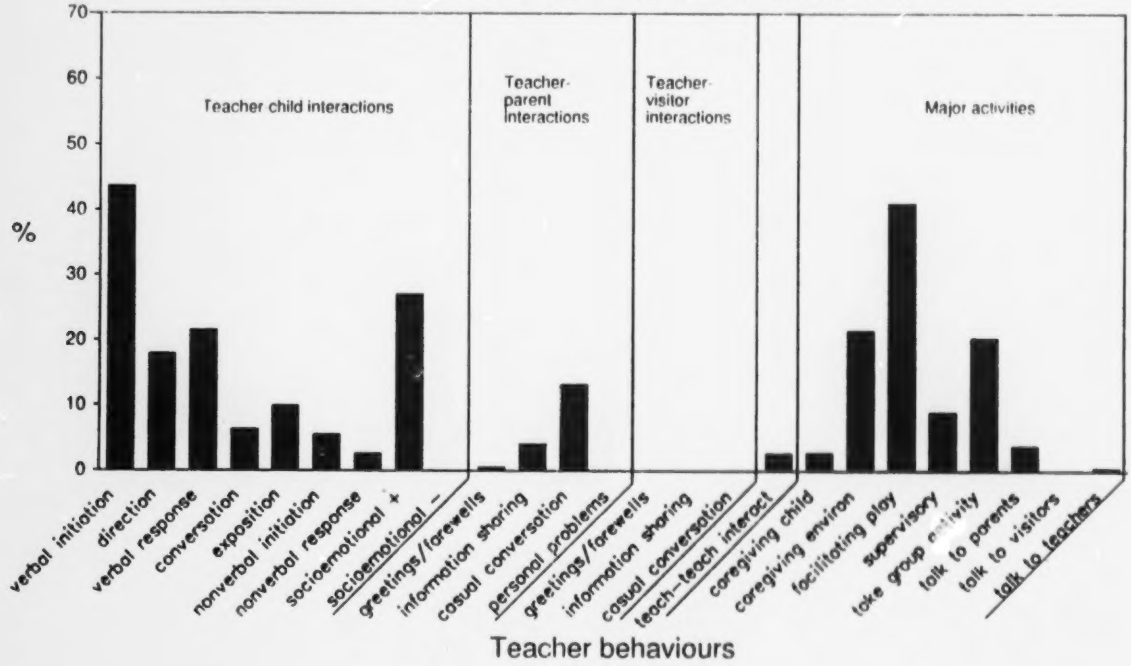


Table 4.16: Teacher behaviours recorded during the observation period at the Southland mobile pre-school unit

		SOUTHLAND MPSU			
		Recorded behaviours			
		Head Teacher		Teacher	
Behaviours which occurred during observed intervals		N*	%†	N	%
Teacher-Child Interactions					
Verbal Initiation	V ->	596	48.9	511	45.2
Direction	D	364	29.8	241	21.3
Verbal Response	V <-	397	32.5	209	18.5
Conversation	C	76	6.2	56	5.0
Exposition	E	236	19.3	130	11.5
Non-verbal Initiation	N ->	82	6.7	90	8.0
Non-verbal Response	N <-	71	5.8	66	5.8
Socioemotional Positive	S+	263	21.6	396	35.0
Socioemotional Negative	S-	0	0	0	0
Teacher-Parent Interactions					
Greetings/Farewells	G or F	18	1.5	13	1.2
Information Sharing	I	53	4.3	25	2.2
Casual Conversation	Ca	126	10.3	131	11.6
Personal Problems	Pp	0	0	0	0
Teacher-Visitor Interactions					
Greetings/Farewells	G or F	0	0	0	0
Information Sharing	I	10	0.8	0	0
Casual Conversation	Ca	15	1.2	1	0.1
Teacher-Teacher Interactions		104	8.5	95	8.4
Major activities occurring during observed intervals		N	%#	N	%
Caregiving Child	CC	22	1.8	30	2.7
Caregiving Environment	CE	55	4.5	180	15.9
Facilitating Play	FP	542	44.4	521	46.1
Supervisory	S	84	6.9	76	6.7
Leading a Group Activity	G	383	31.4	254	22.5
Talking to Parents	P	103	8.4	45	4.0
Talking to Visitors	V	13	1.1	11	1.0
Talking to Teachers	T	18	1.5	13	1.2
Total Intervals Observed		1220		1130	

*, †, # : Refer to footnotes in Table 4.8 above.

Figure 4.27: Proportion of observed intervals in which each of various teacher behaviours occurred: the head teacher, Southland MPSU

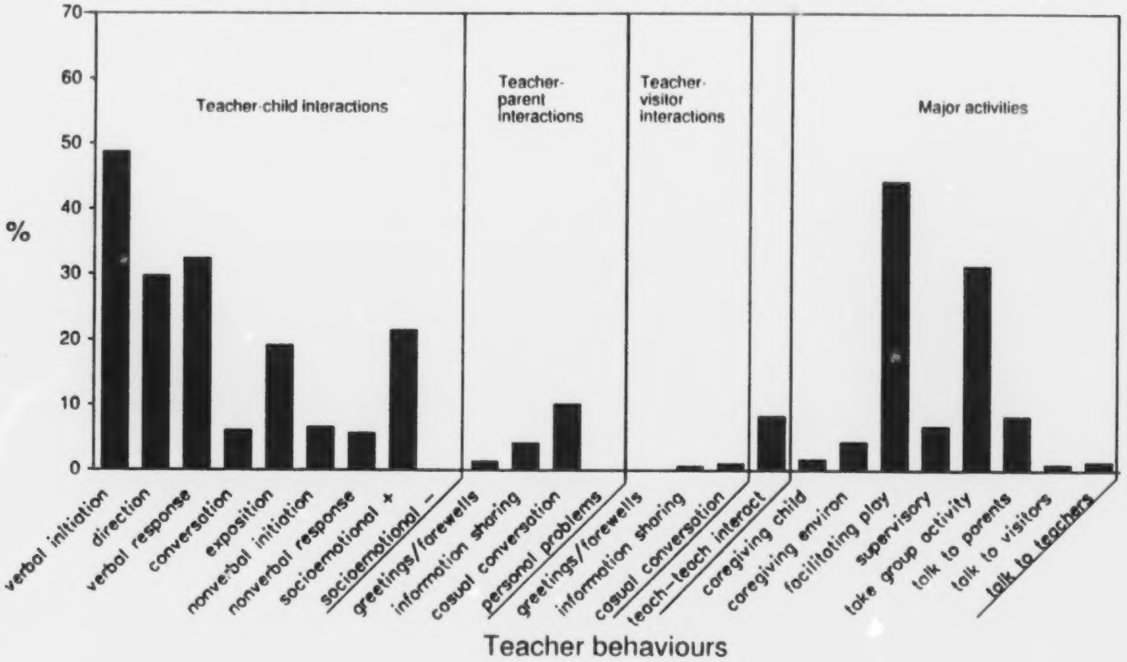
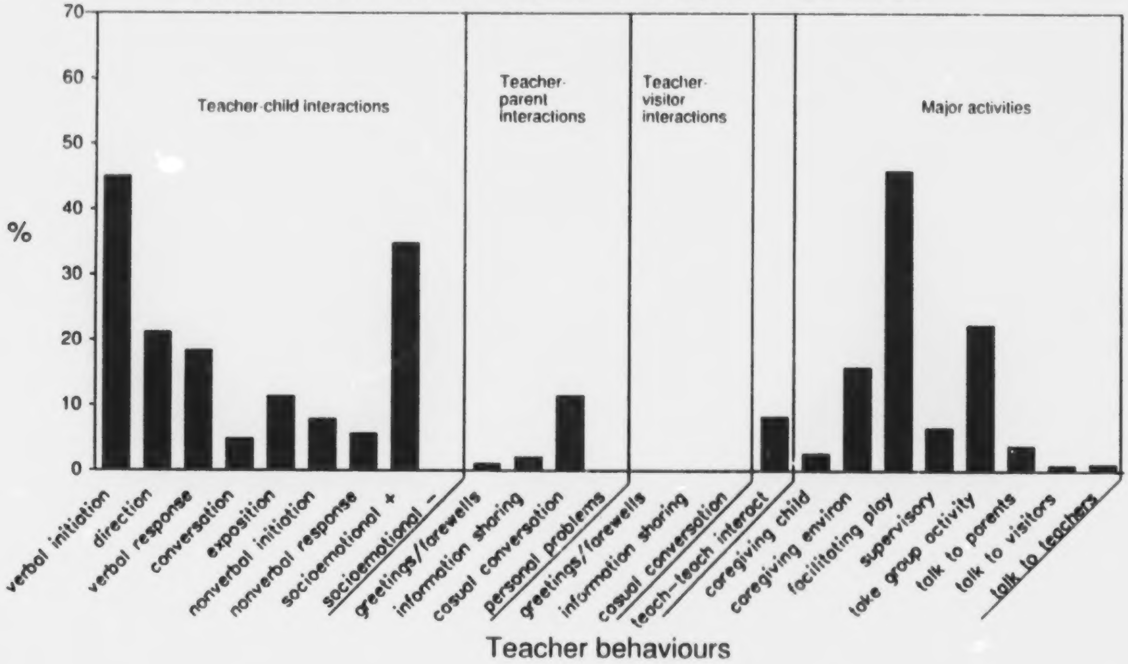
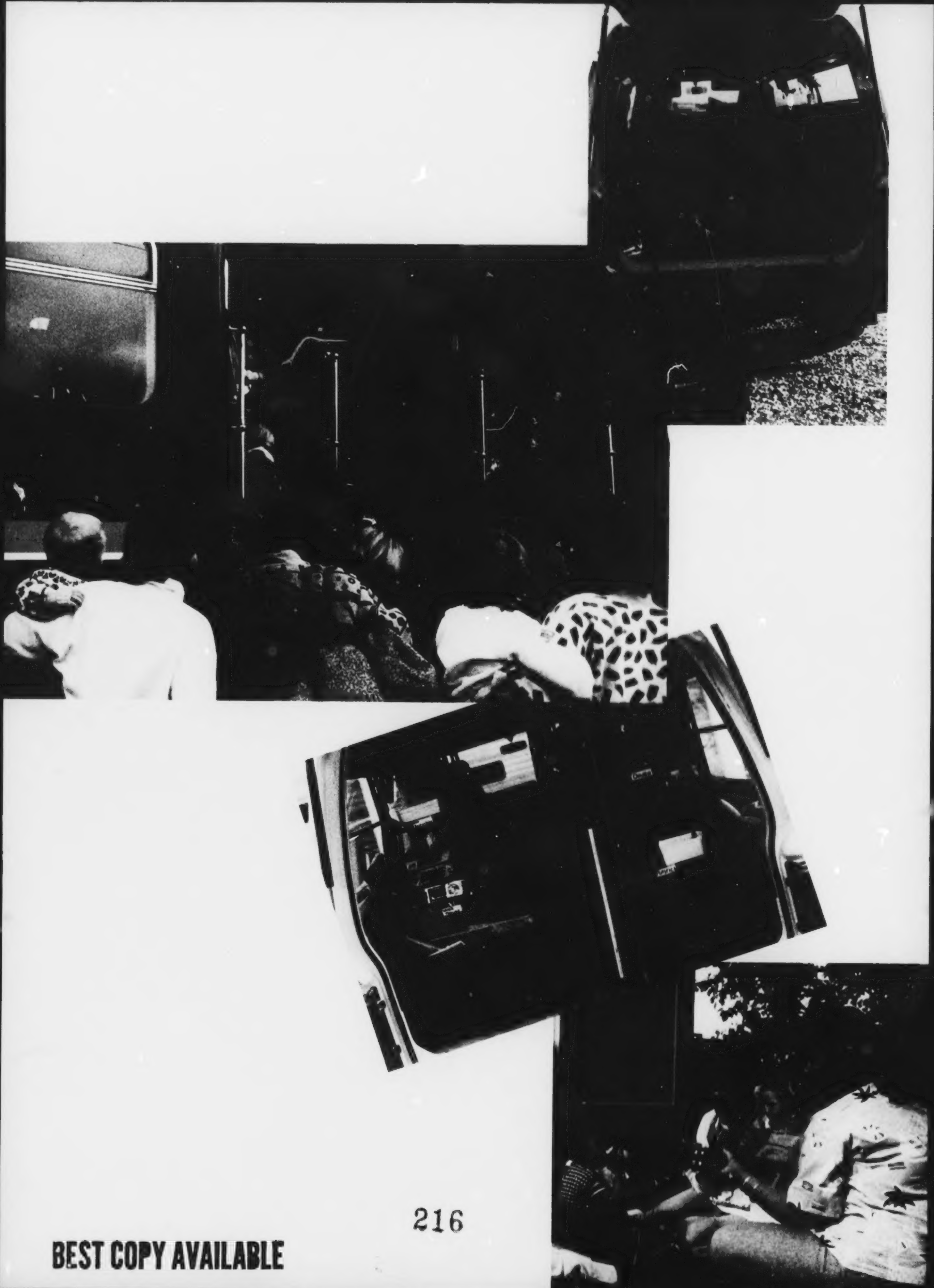


Figure 4.28: Proportion of observed intervals in which each of various teacher behaviours occurred: the second teacher, Southland MPSU





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CHAPTER FIVE : PARENTS', AND PARENT COMMITTEES', VIEWS ON MOBILE PRE-SCHOOL UNITS

Introduction

A major focus of this study was to look at mobile pre-school units in relation to parents/caregivers[27] and to assess the effect of the units on the lives of parents. An important way of assessing the relationship was to obtain information from the parents themselves on the nature and extent of their involvement both during and outside session times and on their attitudes towards mobile pre-school units. To obtain such information, it was decided to approach the parents of children who attended the mobile pre-school units directly rather than by post (obtaining names and addresses in advance would have proved problematical in any case). During the observation week at each mobile unit, therefore, the researchers distributed questionnaires[28] and an accompanying explanatory letter to each of the parents present. After answering any queries they may have had about the study, the parents were asked to complete the questionnaire they had been given and post it to the Research and Statistics Division of the Department (Ministry) of Education, Wellington in the stamped, addressed envelope provided - although some respondents chose to complete their questionnaires during session times and return it in person to one of the researchers. (For parents not present at sessions during the observation periods, additional questionnaires were left with the teachers or other parents who volunteered to pass them on to the relevant people.)

A number of other means were also used to gain information about parents' views and the nature and extent of their involvement with the mobile pre-school units. For instance, almost all groups visited by each mobile unit had their own parent committee[29] which was involved in some way with the running of the group (eg fundraising, maintaining the facilities where the group met, purchasing some equipment, organising parent rosters and so on). Each of these groups was given a 'parent committee questionnaire' to complete. As explained in Chapter 2, the purpose of the parent committee questionnaire was to obtain additional information which it did not seem appropriate to ask individual parents to answer.

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[27] To avoid unwieldy sentences, the term 'caregiver' has been dropped in the pages which follow, although the concept of caregiver continues to be implicit in the use of the term parents'.

[28] Although it would have been desirable to talk in-depth to parents about their experience of, and perceptions on, the mobile pre-school units which they and their children attended, time just did not allow for this, hence the use of questionnaires. Some informal discussion between parents and researchers at some sessions, however, provided valuable insight into the views held by parents about mobile pre-school units.

[29] Except in the case of the Lakeland mobile pre-school unit which had only one such committee - made up of members from the five different groups visited by the unit, and two of the 11 playgroups visited by the YWCA mobile unit which did not have parent committees either.

The teacher interviews (discussed in Chapter 3) also included items which specifically asked about parental involvement with the mobile pre-school units and both the formal (reported in Chapter 4) and informal observational fieldwork carried out by the researchers was directed towards obtaining some insight into parents' participation. (Informal observational data have been included in the individual case studies for each mobile unit.)

Content of Questionnaires

The parent questionnaire which was used included items which asked parents to rate how happy they felt their child was at mobile pre-school unit sessions, whether they felt that good learning experiences were being provided for children and whether they were satisfied with the amount of time the unit was able to spend in their area. The questionnaire also asked parents for background details about children attending mobile unit sessions (age, gender), their reasons for using a mobile unit, their involvement in mobile unit sessions, their relationships with teachers, the benefits for them personally of being connected with the unit and what they liked 'best' and 'least' about the mobile pre-school unit which visited their community.

The questionnaire for parent committees/groups - which could be answered by a spokesperson appointed by the group or as a joint effort - asked how satisfied committees were with the programme provided by their mobile pre-school unit, and how satisfied they were with the availability of the teachers to talk to about their children and other matters, and to help parents acquire skills necessary to run independent sessions on the days the mobile unit did not visit. Parent committees were also asked about the extent to which they were involved in the running and organisation of the mobile unit's programme for their area, the nature and frequency of the sessions which were run by the committees on the days that the mobile unit did not visit, whether or not children who attended the mobile unit also participated in other early childhood education programmes, and the committees' views of the major present and likely future early childhood education needs of their particular area.

It was intended, then, that the questions in both the parent and parent committee questionnaires would elicit information about the nature of the children, parents, and communities catered for by each mobile pre-school unit and would provide data on how satisfied parents were with the programme provided by their unit, the extent to which parents were involved during sessions and in the overall running and organisation of the mobile unit.

Organisation of Chapter

The data obtained from the parent and parent committee questionnaires regarding aspects of mobile pre-school units, as outlined above, are discussed in detail in the remainder of this chapter. Information from each questionnaire which relates to the same topic is reported together, while other issues not common to both questionnaires are discussed sequentially. The first part of the chapter (pages 187-198) is devoted to background details about the children who attended mobile units (age, gender, number), the distance travelled by parents to attend sessions, and the reasons respondents gave for using the service provided by their mobile pre-school unit. The second part of the chapter (from page 198 following) covers topics relating to parents', and parent committees', perceptions of their particular mobile pre-school unit, and the nature and extent of parental involvement during sessions. Part III (p.259ff) is entirely devoted to discussion of data obtained from the parent committee questionnaires and mainly concerns the role of the committees in the running and organisation of the different mobile pre-school units both at the local group level and overall. Finally, Part IV (p.273ff) provides a brief summary of the major findings presented in this chapter.

Response Rates

Parents

A total of 501 questionnaires was received from the parents whose communities were visited by a mobile pre-school unit, approximately 70% of the questionnaires distributed. Forty-three questionnaires were received from the YWCA unit in West Auckland (58% of those handed out in this area), 42 (86%) from the Clevedon unit, 58 (85%) from Franklin, 42 (50%) from Thames, 24 (55%) from Lakeland, 52 (79%) from Hunterville, 61 (74%) from Marlborough, 86 (75%) from Waimate, and 93 (70%) from the Southland mobile pre-school unit.

Parent committees

Thirty-six (69%) out of a possible 52 parent committee questionnaires were received. Two (22%) were received from the YWCA mobile pre-school unit, 2 (67%) from Clevedon, 4 (100%) from Franklin, 4 (100%) from Thames, 1 (100%) from Lakeland[30] , 5 (63%) from Hunterville, 5 (71%) from Marlborough, 7 (88%) from Waimate and 6 (75%) from the Southland mobile pre-school unit.

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[30] As stated earlier, although the Lakeland mobile pre-school unit visited five different groups there was only one parent committee altogether. This was made up of interested parents from the combined groups, although members were most likely to come from only two or three of the five groups.

Because recipients of the parent committee questionnaire were invited to either nominate one person to complete the questionnaire on behalf of the group or to have several people contribute to the responses made, they were also asked to state how many had helped to fill in the questionnaire and how many of the respondents were committee members and how many were non-committee members. Results, by mobile unit, are shown in Table 5.1.

The number of respondents who answered individual questionnaires ranged from one (for 12 groups from five different mobile pre-school units) to nine (for two groups from two separate mobile units). The majority of groups (20) had between 1 and 3 respondents, 12 had 4-6 respondents and three had 8-9 respondents. Those who took part were predominantly committee members (and of course also parents) but in a few instances (five groups from four mobile units) parents who were not committee members contributed to the final answers recorded in the questionnaires as well.

Table 5.1: The number of respondents who contributed to completed parent committee questionnaires, by mobile pre-school unit

	Committee members	Non-committee members	Total by group	Total by MPSU[a]
Auckland YWCA				
• Sunnyvale	4	-	4	
• Herald Island	3	1	4	**8**
Clevedon				
• Brookby	3	-	3	
• Clevedon	3	1	4	**7**
Franklin				
• Tuakau	5	-	5	
• Mangatawhiri	9	-	-	
• Mercer	1	-	1	
• Waiau Pa	6	-	6	**21**
Thames				
• Puriri	4	5	9	
• Ngatea	2	-	2	
• Kopuarahi	4	-	4	
• Te Puru	1	-	1	**16**
Hunterville				
• Ohingaitai	1	-	1	
• Hunterville	1	-	1	
• Papuni	1	-	1	
• Taoroa	1	-	1	
• Moawhango	1	-	1	**5**

cont...

Table 5.1 cont.

	Committee members	Non-committee members	Total by group	Total by MPSU[a]
Lakeland				
• Rangitaikei	1	-	1	1
Marlborough				
• Linkwater	4	-	4	
• Havelock	1	-	1	
• Wairau Valley	3	-	3	
• Rai Valley	1	-	1	
• Ward	1	-	1	10
Waimate				
• Glenavy	1	-	1	
• Otaio	2	-	2	
• Southburn	2	-	2	
• Hunter	2	-	2	
• Ikiwai	9	-	9	
• Morven	5	-	5	
• Waihaorunga	8	-	8	27
Southland				
• Fairfax	2	-	2	
• Mimihau	2	-	2	
• Longbush	2	-	2	
• Waimatuku	2	4	6	
• South Hillend	2	3	5	
• Drummond	1	-	1	18

[a] Numbers in this column indicate the total number of respondents who represented, by means of the parent committee questionnaires, the views of parents in the areas served by each particular mobile pre-school unit.

As can be seen from Table 5.1, the views of parents, via parent committees, were considerably better represented at some mobile pre-school units than at others eg only two out of a possible nine parent committees (with a total of 8 contributors) from the YWCA unit returned a questionnaire, compared to seven out of a possible eight (with 27 contributors) from the Waimate unit. This variation should be kept in mind when looking at data reported in this chapter, especially as the various groups served by each mobile pre-school unit were often very different in character.

PART I : BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Before asking parents to give their views on different aspects of mobile pre-school units (eg how happy their children were at sessions and the benefits they themselves gained) a series of questions requesting basic data about the number, age and sex of their children who attended sessions, the distance necessary to travel to attend sessions, and reasons for using the mobile unit were included in the questionnaire.

Respondents' Relationship to the Child/Children Attending Mobile Pre-school Units

When asked to state their relationship with the child (or children) through whom they were associated with a mobile pre-school unit 98% of respondents indicated they were the mother of the child/children, while 1% said they were the father. In one instance, a questionnaire was completed jointly by both parents and in three other cases, the respondents indicated that they were a grandparent or other caregiver.

Number[31], Age and Gender of Children Attending Mobile Pre-School Units, March to July 1988

Number

In response to an item which asked them to indicate how many of their children were currently attending a mobile pre-school unit, 74% (370) of respondents said they had one child attending a mobile unit, 23% (114) had two children and 2% (10) three children. One respondent indicated that she had four children (quadruplets) attending. The 501 parents who responded to the survey reported a total of 632 children between them who were attending the nine mobile pre-school units in New Zealand during 1988. This is, of course, a conservative estimate given that not all parents responded to the survey[32].

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[31] Note: At mobile pre-school units, 'children who attend' and 'children who are enrolled' often result in quite different totals ie although most mobile units have a policy of allowing a wide age range to attend sessions, children under enrolment age are not officially recognised and are therefore not formally recorded on the rolls. However, as the presence of the younger children frequently has a major influence on the type of programme that is run it does not seem realistic to 'ignore' these children in attendance figures.

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Age Range of the Children Attending Mobile Pre-School Units

Parents were asked to record the age of any of their children who attended mobile unit sessions. It was the policy of some mobile pre-school units to welcome babies and toddlers (as long as they were accompanied by an adult), hence ages ranged from less than one year up to 5 years. Table 5.2 shows the number of children in different age ranges for each mobile pre-school unit. The data showed that almost one-fifth of attenders were under $2^{1}/_{2}$ years, around one-third were aged $2^{1}/_{2}$ up to $3^{1}/_{2}$ years (9% of this group fell into the $2^{1}/_{2}$ up to 3 years category) and approximately 50% were between $3^{1}/_{2}$ and 5 years. The finding that, overall, around half of the children attending mobile groups were less than $3^{1}/_{2}$ years shows a marked contrast to the population of 'conventional', town kindergartens many of which are unable to admit children (because of long waiting lists and/or regulations) to their programmes before they are $3^{1}/_{2}$ years and certainly not before their third birthday. As noted elsewhere in the report, teachers frequently commented that having a large number of very young children attend sessions had a significant effect on the programme that was run.

As is apparent from Table 5.2, the Clevedon, Franklin and Southland mobile pre-school units differed from the other six units with regard to their policy on very young children. Although they did not refuse permission for toddlers to attend with their parents they preferred that parents, other than those on roster duty, did not bring along their under three year olds. Sometimes this was because the teachers felt it was too difficult to run sessions adequately with such a wide age range, especially when the presence of very young children meant that parents had to stay and supervise them, adding considerably to the noise level and to congestion problems in small venues. At other times it was simply because roll numbers (and waiting lists) were already so high that it was not feasible - or fair - to have additional children who were not officially enrolled attending regularly.

Gender

Of the children whose parents responded to the question on gender, 55% were male and 45% were female.

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[32] Official figures from the Research and Statistics Division of the Ministry of Education show that roll numbers for mobile pre-school units as at 1 July 1988 totalled 858 (not counting children under $2^{1}/_{2}$ years). The equivalent figure as at 1 July 1989 was 810.

Table 5.2 : The age of children attending mobile pre-schools, by mobile unit

	Age of Children																		
Name of Unit	Up to 1 Year		1 Year Up to 18 Months		18mths up to 2 Years		2 Years Up to 2.5 Years		2.5 Years Up Up to 3 Years		3 Years Up to 3.5 Years		3.5 Years Up to 4 Years		4 Years Up to 4.5 Years		4.5 Years Up to 5 Years		Totals *
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N
YWCA	7	11.7	2	3.3	6	10.0	13	21.7	10	16.7	11	18.3	5	8.3	4	6.7	2	3.3	60
Clevedon	-	-	1	2.2	-	-	-	-	-	-	10	22.2	8	17.4	20	44.4	6	13.3	45
Franklin	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	1.6	8	13.1	4	6.6	34	55.7	14	23.0	61
Thames	2	3.6	2	3.6	3	5.4	5	8.9	2	3.6	11	19.6	8	14.3	17	30.4	6	10.7	56
Lakeland	-	-	1	3.4	1	3.4	1	3.4	3	10.3	9	31.0	1	3.4	10	34.5	3	10.3	29
Hunterville	4	5.4	5	6.8	8	10.8	5	6.8	10	13.5	12	16.2	10	13.5	13	17.6	7	9.5	74
Marlborough	3	3.8	1	1.3	7	8.8	5	6.3	11	13.8	22	27.5	6	7.5	18	22.5	7	8.8	80
Waimate	8	7.0	7	6.1	8	7.0	11	9.6	15	13.0	22	19.1	7	6.1	28	24.3	9	7.8	115
Southland	-	-	-	-	-	-	4	3.6	5	4.5	35	31.3	12	10.7	50	44.6	6	5.4	112
Totals N	24		19		33		44		57		140		61		194		60		632
%	3.8		3.0		5.2		7.0		9.0		22.2		9.7		30.7		9.5		

* NOTE: These totals (of children) were from data provided by responding parents only, and do not represent total enrolments at the time fieldwork was carried out.

Table 5.3 shows the distribution of female and male children for each mobile pre-school unit.

Table 5.3: Gender of children attending mobile pre-school units

	Female		Male		Total
	N	%	N	%	
YWCA	25	41.0	36	59.0	61
Clevedon	22	48.9	23	51.1	45
Franklin	20	32.8	41	67.2	62
Thames	30	53.6	26	46.4	56
Lakeland	12	42.9	16	57.1	28
Hunterville	30	41.1	43	58.9	73
Marlborough	41	50.6	40	49.4	81
Waimate	49	43.0	65	57.0	114
Southland	55	49.1	57	50.9	112
Total	284		347		631[a]

[a] Numbers in this column vary a little from the total (and sub-totals) in Table 5.2 because not all parents answered all items in the questionnaire.

As can be seen from Table 5.3, only the Clevedon, Thames, Marlborough and Southland units had a reasonably even distribution of male and female children. The remainder had a predominance of boys, the most notable being the Franklin mobile pre-school unit which had twice as many boys as girls attending sessions.

Attendance at Mobile Pre-School Units in Previous Years

Parents were asked if any of their other children had attended a mobile pre-school unit in the past. Just over half of the respondents (54%) had never had any other children attending a unit while 30% had had one child attend in the past, 14% had had two children and 2% had had three children attend in past years. As parents were not asked any further details about their families it is not possible to say whether the reason a little more than half of respondents said they had not had any other child attend a mobile unit was because they did not have older children (although this was probably the case in many instances judging by informal observations during the fieldwork periods) or some other reason such as previously living in another location where there was either no mobile pre-school unit or there was access to alternative early childhood education facilities.

Distances Travelled and Reported Difficulties in Travelling to Mobile Pre-School Unit Sessions

Distances Travelled to Attend Sessions

Parents were asked to indicate how far they had to travel to attend mobile pre-school unit sessions and whether they had any difficulties associated with travelling to sessions. 'Distance' was taken as being the number of kilometres from their home to the session location.

Just over half (56%) of the respondents travelled from less than 1 up to 5 kilometres each way, while 23% travelled between 5 and 10 kilometres and 9% travelled between 10 and 15 kilometres. A further 10% of parents travelled between 15 and 25 kilometres while 2% travelled between 25 and 45 kilometres. Two parents drove more than 50 kilometres each way to enable their children to attend mobile pre-school unit sessions. Thus, although more than half of mobile pre-school unit parents were probably only travelling distances comparable to that travelled by parents connected with town kindergartens (ie from less than one up to 5 kilometres each way, a maximum of around 10 kilometres) a significant percentage of parents (12%) were travelling considerable distances - from 15 to 55 kilometres each way - to ensure that their children could attend mobile pre-school unit sessions.

Table 5.4 shows distances travelled by parents from each mobile pre-school unit. Parents who travelled the greatest distances were those associated with the Waimate, Southland, Hunterville and Franklin mobile pre-school units, in general, the most rural of the units. As might be expected, because of its urban location, parents and children from the YWCA unit had least distance to travel to attend sessions.

Difficulties in Travelling to Sessions, as Reported by Parents

The majority of respondents (94%) reported that they did not have any difficulties in travelling to their mobile unit sessions. Of the 31 respondents who did state that they experienced one or more types of travel difficulty the most frequently stated (by 15 parents) related to access to transport eg not having their own vehicle, having to share a vehicle with a spouse, having to rely on a bus for transport or not having a bus service at all. Other respondents, all from rural areas, mentioned difficulties caused by a combination of bad

Table 5.4: Distances travelled each way by parents/children to attend sessions at each mobile pre-school unit

Distance each way (kms)

	Less than 5		5 up to 10		10 up to 15		15 up to 20		20 up to 25		25 up to 30		30 up to 35		35 up to 40		40 up to 45		45 up to 50		50 up to 55		Totals
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N
YWCA	41	100.0	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	41
Clevedon	32	76.2	8	19.0	2	4.8	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	42
Franklin	35	63.6	12	21.8	2	3.6	3	5.5	1	1.8	-	-	-	-	1	1.8	-	-	-	-	1	1.8	55
Thames	28	70.0	5	12.5	5	12.5	2	5.0	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	40
Lakeland	12	57.1	6	28.6	3	14.3	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	21
Hunterville	21	42.0	11	22.0	7	14.0	6	12.0	3	6.0	-	-	1	2.0	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	2.0	50
Marlborough	31	53.4	14	24.1	6	10.3	6	10.3	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	1.7	-	-	-	-	58
Waimate	32	40.0	24	30.0	5	6.3	11	13.8	5	6.3	1	1.3	1	1.3	-	-	1	1.3	-	-	-	-	80
Southland	36	39.6	30	33.0	12	13.2	5	5.5	4	4.4	-	-	1	1.1	2	2.2	1	1.1	-	-	-	-	91
Totals N	268		110		42		33		13		1		3		3		3		0		2		478
%		56.1		23.0		8.8		6.9		2.7		0.2		0.6		0.6		0.6		0.0		0.4	

weather and adverse road conditions (eg gravel roads which were not always well maintained) seasonal farming commitments which involved extra work at home and made it difficult for them to take time to make the journey, the economic climate - ie the cost of petrol at a time when farmers were cutting back, the distance being too great, and difficulties in organising car pooling when unable to make the journey to a session themselves.

No responding parents from the Lakeland mobile pre-school unit identified travel problems, while no particular reason seemed to dominate for respondents from the other eight units.

Travel Difficulties Reported by Parent Committees

Parent committees were asked a similar but slightly more extensive question about difficulties parents might experience in getting to sessions. The wording of the question was: 'Do parents in your area have any particular difficulties in ensuring that their children are able to attend the mobile unit sessions and/or the sessions run by the committee (eg because of distance to travel, seasonal commitments like lambing/shearing, cultural events etc)?' Although few individual parents reported that they had travel difficulties, 50% of the parent committees, representing eight mobile pre-school units (the exception was Clevedon), indicated 'Yes', some parents in their areas did have difficulties. There were, however, also 50% of parent committees (from all but the Lakeland mobile pre-school unit) which felt that, generally, parents did not have difficulties getting to sessions or, if they did, they were usually able to arrange transport for their children with other parents.

The committees which indicated that there were difficulties were asked to state what these difficulties were. The most frequently mentioned (by 13 parent committees associated with the Thames, Hunterville, Lakeland, Marlborough, Waimate and Southland mobile units) was that of seasonal farming commitments such as haymaking, calving/lambing, shearing etc which meant that during such busy times some parents were unable to spare the time to take their children to sessions. (Some of these committees mentioned that parents were sometimes also committed to helping with school-based activities at times which coincided with mobile unit sessions. At such times, parents tended to take their pre-schoolers along to school with them.)

The distance parents had to travel was noted as a difficulty by four parent committees (from the Thames, Hunterville, Lakeland and Southland units), transportation difficulties (eg lack of transport) by five (YWCA, Thames, Marlborough and Waimate) the road and weather conditions by two committees (Hunterville and Thames) and economic difficulties by two parent committees associated with the Franklin and Waimate mobile pre-school units.

Three parent committees (from the Thames, Hunterville and Southland mobile pre-school units) felt that the travel difficulties they had identified (sometimes) resulted in smaller rolls, while six committees (from the Hunterville, Southland and Waimate units) felt that these difficulties had little or no effect on mobile unit sessions, mainly because of efficient car pooling. The other nine parent committees who identified travel or other difficulties experienced by parents in getting their children to sessions did not comment on what effects (if any) such difficulties had on the mobile pre-school unit.

Parents' Reasons for Using Mobile Pre-School Units

While it was possible to hypothesise about the most likely reasons parents would take their children along to mobile pre-school unit sessions (eg because they were committed to ensuring that their child(ren) received early childhood education experience, and/or that the mobile unit was the only pre-school service available etc etc) we felt it was important to find out from the parents themselves what their major motivation was for using a mobile unit. For this reason, an item inviting parents to state their 'main reasons for using the mobile pre-school unit' was included in the questionnaire. A total of 489 (98%) parents responded to this item.

Most respondents referred either specifically or in more general terms to the fact that they used their local mobile pre-school unit primarily to ensure that their child or children received some pre-school education. Parents in more rural areas were particularly conscious that, if it were not for the mobile units, their children would not otherwise receive pre-school education (at least, not in the company of other children). More specifically, Table 5.5 shows the major categories of reasons respondents from each mobile pre-school unit gave for using their particular unit. (The item in the questionnaire was open-ended so that respondents could put whatever they wished to say; their answers were subsequently coded into the categories given in the table). Often, respondents gave more than one reason.

As shown in Table 5.5, the most frequently stated reason by parents overall for using their local mobile pre-school unit was that sessions provided an important opportunity for their children to interact socially with others of their own age. Another major reason given was that their local mobile unit was the closest pre-school education facility. Reasons frequently mentioned by other parents were that sessions: provided good play opportunities plus activities that were stimulating and different from those experienced at home; prepared children for school; developed and extended children's educational experiences and learning opportunities; and provided social interaction for both children **and** parents. A total of 40 parents gave more general reasons for using their local mobile pre-school unit. They

Table 5.5: Major reasons given by parents for using a mobile pre-school unit

Reason	Mobile Unit																			
	YWCA		Clevedon		Franklin		Thames		Lakeland		Hunterville		Marlborough		Waimate		Southland		Totals	
	N*	%†	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1 To enable my child to interact socially with other children of similar age	23	54.8	22	52.4	16	28.6	20	48.8	9	39.1	21	40.4	39	65.0	51	63.0	48	52.2	249	50.9
2 Because it was the only, or closest pre-school education facility available	6	14.3	22	52.4	25	44.6	18	43.9	12	52.2	24	46.2	12	20.0	21	26.0	27	29.3	167	34.2
3 The stimulating play environment provided for the children (eg different activities not available at home)	18	42.9	6	14.3	8	14.3	5	12.2	2	8.7	5	9.6	10	16.7	24	29.6	18	19.6	96	19.6
4 Children receive some preparation for school	-	-	11	26.2	13	23.2	5	12.2	3	13.0	7	13.5	9	15.0	14	17.3	28	30.4	90	18.4
5 The educational/ learning opportunities provided for children	1	2.4	-	-	3	5.3	11	26.8	4	17.4	10	19.2	13	21.7	16	20.0	12	13.0	70	14.3
6 The social opportunities for both parents and chidlren	4	9.5	4	9.5	1	1.8	2	4.9	1	4.3	10	19.2	14	23.3	12	14.8	4	4.3	52	10.6

cont...

Table 5.5 continued

7 Generally liking and approving the overall concept, nature and aims of mobile pre-school units	2	4.8	5	11.9	4	7.1	2	4.9	-	-	3	5.8	9	15.0	10	12.3	5	5.4	40	8.2
8 The opportunity for parents to meet socially with other adults (parents, teachers).	10	23.8	1	2.4	-	-	2	4.9	1	4.3	7	13.5	3	5.0	3	3.7	1	1.1	28	5.7
Total no. of comments made	64		71		70		65		32		87		109		151		143		792	
Total no. of respondents	42		42		56		41		23		52		60		81		92		489	

* The numbers in the table refer to the number of comments made by respondents under each broad category.

† The percentages refer to the proportion of respondents from each mobile unit (and overall) who gave each type of reason.

commented, for example, that they enjoyed the happy, friendly and comfortable atmosphere at sessions, that the mobile unit was "like a family group with a homely environment", that the unit provided "excellent pre-school education" and that they agreed with both the aims of the unit and its teaching methods. A further 28 respondents mentioned that a major reason for using the unit was that they themselves benefited a great deal through getting an opportunity to meet and talk with other adults, an opportunity that was not otherwise readily available.

Additional reasons, mentioned by fewer than five percent of respondents in each case, were as follows:

a the mobile unit gave children an opportunity to get used to routine and discipline outside the home (19 respondents)
b children developed independence through attending sessions (18);
c the personal and professional attributes of the teachers (16);
d their children enjoyed attending sessions (15);
e there were no waiting lists (14);
f roll numbers were small (14);
g the mobile unit supplied information and provided ideas to use at home with children; (12); and,
h the mobile unit enabled parents to have some time at home by themselves (5).

Finally, 26 parents gave a variety of 'other' reasons for using a mobile pre-school unit. (One parent, for example, stated that sessions provided an outlet for her child's "excess energy", while another felt that it was beneficial for her handicapped child to be able to attend sessions.)

When respondents' most frequently given reasons are looked at by individual mobile pre-school unit it can be seen that parents from the YWCA were the least likely of all parents to say that they used their mobile unit simply because it was the closest, or only pre-school education facility available. They were also more likely than parents from other units to say that they used their mobile unit because it provided a stimulating play environment for their children.

When the closely related categories 6 and 8 in Table 5.5 are combined, it can be seen that the social/community aspect was most often mentioned by parents from the YWCA (33%), Hunterville (33%), Marlborough (28%) and Waimate (19%) units as a reason for using their local mobile pre-school unit. Compared with parents from the four units just mentioned, respondents from the Clevedon, Franklin and Southland units were much less likely to refer to the social benefits for parents (largely, perhaps, because this was not a primary focus of these mobile units) but much more likely to say that a major reason for using the mobile unit was to ensure that their children received some preparation for school.

The following quotes express some of the needs which parents said the mobile pre-school units helped meet:

> ***"I am a solo parent with only one child and felt it important for him to socialise with other children, plus since he has been going his horizons have opened up and he's far more confident and chatty - what better reason [for attending sessions] than I enjoy how it makes him a happier child."***
>
> ***"I find it such a positive place for myself to have friendships built up with the people in the district whom otherwise I would only wave to and it's a place of great pleasure to my children as it's their only contact with other children till they go to school."***

PART II : PARENTS', AND PARENT COMMITTEES', FEELINGS ABOUT MOBILE PRE-SCHOOL UNITS

Parents, and parent committees, were asked to respond to a series of questions about their feelings towards different aspects of mobile pre-school unit sessions. The questions took the form of rating scale items whereby parents were asked to circle one of five options, ranging from a very positive response to a very negative response. The mid-point of each scale was designated a 'neutral' response while the categories immediately to left and right of the mid-point were not defined. Parents were also given an opportunity to comment on their ratings if they wished.

The particular aspects of mobile pre-school units that parents/parent committees were invited to respond to, related to how happy they felt their children were at mobile unit sessions (parents only), how good they felt the learning experiences provided by the mobile unit sessions were (both parents and committees), how satisfied they were with the amount of time the unit could spend in their area (parents and committees)[33] and how helpful they felt teachers were when discussing their children (parents only). Respondents' views on each aspect are discussed in turn below.

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[33] Responses to an additional item, on whether parents sent their children to other pre-school education facilities as well as to mobile unit sessions are also included in this section of the chapter.

Parents' Ratings of How Happy Children were at Mobile Unit Sessions

An important measure of any environment is to assess in some way the satisfaction or enjoyment derived by those who are part of that environment. Thus the question: 'Is your child (children) generally happy, or generally unhappy at sessions?' was included in the survey of parental opinion. The data showed that the majority (94%) of the 498 parents who responded chose either '5' - to indicate 'Very happy' (71%) or '4' (24%) on the rating scale, which clearly indicates that mobile pre-school units were, in general, very successful in creating positive (social) environments. Seventeen parents chose the mid-point of the scale suggesting that their children were neither happy nor unhappy at sessions or that they varied according to mood and/or circumstances while twelve responded that their children were less than happy - seven parents circled the '2' and five circled the '1' ('Very unhappy').

A total of 164 respondents chose to comment on the rating that they had given regarding their children's happiness at sessions. The greatest number of these respondents (81) made general positive comments about sessions such as children looked forward to attending, they found it exciting, they never wanted to leave, they would go every day if possible, and so on. A further 23 commented on the positive social aspects of the sessions which helped make children happy, such as their child enjoying the company of other children who were attending. Five respondents attributed their children's happiness at sessions to the personality and skill of the teachers, while a further five commented that their children were happy mainly because they were by nature cheerful, independent, open, and socially adept.

One-fifth (33) of those who commented chose to qualify their selection of the mid-point of the scale or their ratings of '2' or '1' ('very unhappy') by noting that often unhappiness was because the child was new to the district and to sessions and had not yet settled in and/or because the child was very young and shy and was not used to being with a lot of other children and adults. Five parents who chose categories '2' or '1' made negative comments, stating either that their children were limited in what they were able to do because of poor outdoor equipment, or that there were not enough stimulating activities provided, especially for older children.

Twelve respondents made 'other' comments relating to the level of their children's happiness such as a change of teachers having helped, that because their children had only just begun attending it was not yet possible to estimate their child's 'happiness' at sessions, that there had been a lot of improvement in their child (socially and in other ways) since attending sessions, and that they felt their child was progressing satisfactorily.

Learning Experiences Provided for Children

It is generally accepted[34] that not only should there be a positive social environment provided for children in early childhood education centres, but also an environment which encourages development in other areas eg verbal interactions, including conversations with adults and other children, fine and large motor skills, learning new knowledge and skills and so on. For this reason, both parents and parent committees were asked to indicate on a five-point scale ranging from 1 ('No, not at all') to 5 ('Yes, very much') whether they thought 'that (in general) the mobile unit sessions provide good learning experiences for children'.

Parents' Views

Results showed that, in general, parents regarded the learning experiences provided by mobile units very positively ie the majority of parents (466, 94%) responded by circling either the '5' (348) or the '4' (118) on the scale, '5' being the most positive. A small number (21) of parents chose the mid-point of the scale (a 'neutral' response) while an even smaller group of parents indicated a negative response by giving a rating of '2' (10) or '1' (2).

When looked at by individual unit it was noted that no respondents from the YWCA, Clevedon, Lakeland, Hunterville or Waimate mobile pre-school units indicated that their units did not provide positive learning experiences.

One hundred-and-ten respondents added comments or qualifying remarks to their rating of the learning experiences provided for children by the mobile pre-school units. The largest number of these respondents (62) commented positively about the activities and experiences children were able to take part in. They mentioned such things as the value of messy play and other activities not available in the home, and the opportunities for social interaction and for special trips to places of interest. Some also referred to the importance of having an event (ie the session(s)) held each week specifically for the child while others particularly liked the feeling that their children were receiving some preparation for school. A further six parents made positive comments about teachers in terms of the learning experiences they provided.

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[34] The Report of the Committee of Inquiry into Pre-School Education (1971), for example, stated that one of the major, general aims of the kindergarten movement in New Zealand was: "To provide a sound basis for the social, emotional, intellectual, and physical growth of the very young child." (p 35) The Report of the Early Childhood Care and Education Working Group (1988), Education To Be More, also stated that "Staff need to... plan integrated programmes which foster the all-round development of individual children as well as challenging the whole group, if children are to benefit fully from early childhood services. Without dominating the children's activities, the adults should guide the play and consciously enrich the children's language." (p19)

A number of respondents (29) who chose '1', '2', or '3' on the rating scale made more negative comments about their children's learning experiences at mobile pre-school unit sessions, indicating, for example, that there was a lack of supervision or encouragement, not enough preparation for school, too many children or not enough teachers, not enough outside activities and insufficient challenge in the activities provided. Seven parents also commented that they felt that older children needed a separate or an extra session in order to have their needs met satisfactorily. (This seemed to be a recurring theme for some parents, and appeared to apply to all of the mobile pre-school units.)

Parent Committees' Views

As for individual parents, parent committees were also generally very positive about the learning experiences that mobile units provided for children. All but two of the 36 responding parent committees circled either the '5 = Yes, very much' (30) or the '4' (4) on the rating scale. One parent committee from the Thames mobile pre-school unit and one from Marlborough chose the mid-point of the rating scale.

Twenty-six committees, representing all nine units, added one or more comments to their ratings of learning experiences provided by mobile pre-school units. Their comments, like the ratings given, were generally very positive. Eight parent committee questionnaires contained specific positive comments concerning the value of social interaction for children which was made possible by attending mobile unit sessions, while 20 committees made general positive comments about teachers' skills, personality and experience, the equipment that was provided, the nature and content of the programmes which were run, and the benefits of small group size. The comments which follow are representative of the positive views expressed:

> ***"[The mobile unit] provides language stimulation, social integration, physical and manipulative skills are taught and children are positively encouraged to attempt developmental [skills] and gain independence in same."***
>
> ***"All basic kindergarten activities are always available. Plus good keen teachers with a variety of ideas for fun things to do and create."***

Four of the parent committees which made specific positive comments about the value to pre-schoolers of being able to interact with other children of their own age also emphasised that such contact was made possible only because of the availability of the mobile pre-school unit in their area, for example:

> ***"For most of our children it is the only formal pre-school education they have due to distance from town and financial/time cost to parents in rural areas."***
>
> ***"Our children would not have any other pre-school education without the mobile unit."***

Five parent committees (from the Clevedon, Franklin, Hunterville, Thames and Marlborough units) made explanatory or qualifying comments about their particular mobile unit, or mobile units in general, eg that the van limited the equipment that could be made available, that having to pack things away each time imposed restrictions when working on ongoing themes, that sessions needed to be more frequent, especially for four to five year olds, and that there was room for improvement in the programme that was being run.

Parents' and Parent Committees' Satisfaction with the Amount of Time the Mobile Pre-School Unit was Able to Spend in Their Area

Because of the itinerant nature of the mobile pre-school units and the fact that each unit visited a minimum of three groups each week, the time that the mobile unit could devote to each group was clearly an important issue. Parents and parent committees were therefore asked for their views on this very salient aspect of mobile pre-school units.

Parents' Satisfaction with the Amount of Time

Parents were asked 'How satisfied are you with the amount of time the mobile unit is able to spend in your area?' The rating scale on which respondents were asked to record their answers ranged from 1 ('Not at all satisfied') to 5 ('Very satisfied'). Of the 493 who responded to this item just over half indicated that they were generally satisfied with the amount of time the mobile unit was able to spend in their area. Seventeen percent of parents gave a 'neutral' response while almost one-third indicated that they were generally dissatisfied (Table 5.6).

It must be remembered at this point that the number of sessions held at each location visited by the different mobile units varied. At the YWCA unit, for example, there was a two-week visiting cycle and while some groups were visited twice during that time, others were visited only once. For the Clevedon mobile pre-school unit, however, there were a total of three venues which shared eight sessions between them; the same group of children may well have been present for up to three sessions a week at a given venue. The Franklin and Thames units each visited four venues twice a week while the Lakeland unit visited five groups, one of which received three sessions a week and one, two sessions. The Hunterville unit visited six groups per week with an extra joint session for two of the groups being held on a Friday morning while the Marlborough unit visited seven different groups (one of which received two sessions a week). The Waimate and Southland units each ran sessions for eight groups over a one week period. It was evident from the data that while some parents were satisfied with one visit a week from their mobile pre-school unit others were dissatisfied when the group which their child attended was receiving two or three sessions per week. It therefore seems likely that, although the number of times the mobile units were currently able to visit individual groups was undoubtedly a significant factor in how satisfied many parents felt with the amount of time allocated for their children to attend sessions, for others, personal preference or personal circumstances (ie ability or inclination to attend sessions) seemed to be just as significant.

Table 5.6 shows parents' satisfaction with the amount of time the mobile unit could spend in their area, by mobile pre-school unit.

Table 5.6: Parents' satisfaction with the amount of time the mobile pre-school unit spent in their area

Mobile pre-school unit	Rating given									
	5 'Very satisfied'		4		3		2		1 'Not at all satisfied'	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
YWCA	12	28.6	15	35.7	6	14.3	8	19.0	1	2.4
Clevedon	12	29.3	13	31.7	8	19.5	6	14.6	2	4.9
Franklin	14	25.0	11	19.6	12	21.4	9	16.1	10	17.9
Thames	12	28.6	9	21.4	5	11.9	10	23.8	6	14.3
Lakeland	8	33.3	5	20.8	3	12.5	8	33.3	0	0.0
Hunterville	9	17.3	19	36.5	9	17.3	8	15.4	7	13.5
Marlborough	14	23.0	11	18.0	7	11.5	18	29.5	11	18.0
Waimate	37	44.0	23	27.4	10	11.9	7	8.3	7	8.3
Southland	16	17.6	13	14.3	23	25.3	21	23.1	18	19.8
Total	134	27.2	119	24.1	83	16.8	95	19.3	62	12.6

Southland and Marlborough respondents showed the most dissatisfaction with the amount of time the mobile pre-school units were able to spend with their groups. As noted above, each of these units was only able to visit venues once a week (with the exception of one group in Marlborough which was visited twice). Parents from the Waimate mobile pre-school group, however, expressed a relatively low level of dissatisfaction (and the highest level of satisfaction of all respondents) despite groups also being visited only once weekly. This may have been because some of the more geographically isolated parents in that area felt that once a week was as much as they could manage in view of farming commitments, cost of travel and distance to travel etc. Conversely, although many parents associated with the Southland and Marlborough mobile units lived in rural areas a large number were also probably less isolated than many of the parents from the Waimate (and Hunterville and Lakeland) unit(s), making it more feasible for them to attend sessions and thereby increasing their desire for more sessions per week. It was also observed during the fieldwork period at each mobile pre-school unit that different groups were often quite different in character - ie their 'atmosphere', mix of parents, general community spirit and so on. It may simply be, therefore, that some groups were keener to have pre-school education in their areas than others.

Two hundred and seventy-four respondents added comments to their rating of satisfaction with the amount of time the mobile pre-school unit spent in their area. These comments were categorised into groups, as described below.

Of the 274 respondents who commented, 196 stated that they were not satisfied with the total amount of time that the mobile unit was able to spend in their area ie that there were not enough visits, and/or visits were not long enough (especially when it was necessary to travel a considerable distance to attend in the first place). A large number of those associated with groups visited only once a week commented that two sessions a week would be appreciated/desirable. Thirty-four respondents were more specific in that they commented that older children need more time at pre-school, especially those nearing school age.

Twenty-one parents said that they were satisfied with the time, given that they would find it very difficult, if not impossible, to bring their child to more sessions because of distance to travel or other commitments. A few also mentioned that they were satisfied with the time because their children were still very young and not yet ready to take part in 'formal' pre-school education on a more regular basis.

Five parents commented that although they were not happy with the time they nevertheless accepted that many parents associated with their mobile unit would probably find it difficult to attend additional sessions anyway and/or that they knew that, short of penalising other groups, it was just not possible for the unit to visit their group more often and that they were therefore very grateful for what they could have. (Although only a very small number of parents made this comment in their questionnaires, this was a remark frequently made informally to the researchers during the fieldwork stages.)

Eighteen respondents made a variety of 'other' comments to explain or qualify their answers, for example, one respondent stated that she wished that she could enrol her child at more than one pre-school institution to help redress the balance of only one session per week from the mobile pre-school unit.

The following quotes are a selection of comments made by parents who were generally **dissatisfied** with the amount of time that mobile pre-school units spent in their areas. As will be seen, a recurrent theme amongst those who expressed dissatisfaction was that country children were disadvantaged compared to town/city children in terms of access to pre-school education.

"The towns have three to five mornings or afternoons a week. I feel we should be able to have more than one session a week. Or be able to drive in to the town kindergarten if we choose. In other words be on both registers if we want."

"Compared with town people it is absolutely terrible."

"My children receive one and three-quarter hours per week whereas friends living in cities have five mornings per week - approximately 13 hours. Even two visits per week would be better. To provide more pre-school education I take my four year old 15 kms to a playcentre which although good, often leaves him confused as these two groups have different rules and expectations of children."

"One session a week hardly brings continuity for children and I have seen a number of children in our group having difficulty settling in at the beginning of each session. By the time the quiet/shy ones have thawed, the session is nearly over."

"One day per week is insufficient for the children to keep to any sort of routine and to feel 'at home' at kindy - especially if one week may be missed out for some reason or another - the time allowed isn't enough."

"I can't rate it '1' [ie 'not at all satisfied'] but feel pre-school education for rural children is not frequent enough by far."

"Our first child was unprepared for school despite attending our one session regularly."

"C. may adapt better if we attended more than once a week. We have been attending now for six weeks and are making very little progress at mixing with other children."

"Country children should have the same opportunities town children have with a permanent kindy, two afternoons a week and the children would benefit a lot more. I do understand the difficulties with travel and the very large area the mobile unit has to cover in one week."

"One morning is not enough. Why should rural children miss out compared to city children who get five mornings a week? More mobile units needed."

'Typical' comments made by those who were generally **satisfied** with the amount of time the mobile unit spent in their area each week were:

> ***"I think that two [half] days a week is fine. I find I can stimulate my four-and-a-half year old at home without too much problem. Kindy helps a lot by giving ideas."***
>
> ***"Considering the travelling and the age of my child - 3 years 4 months - it is quite adequate."***
>
> ***"I'm very satisfied - my son would, however, like to be there every day."***
>
> ***"The distance that I have to travel means that even if there were more sessions I probably wouldn't be able to attend."***
>
> ***"I am very satisfied with the quality of the time spent."***

Some of the respondents who chose the **mid-point of the scale** when rating satisfaction with the time the mobile unit spent in their area explained or qualified their answers as follows:

> ***"Naturally, I would like to think that closer to five [years] that he would have the opportunity to spend more time at kindergarten in preparation for a full day at school."***
>
> ***"The children could do with more sessions, especially the four year olds but the travelling does make this extremely difficult for the parents."***
>
> ***"Would really love another session each week. The two hours on one day is enough for that day but another session would enhance the programme."***
>
> ***"Although I would be happy to see another session as I don't have to travel, the majority of our group do [have to travel] and would not be able to attend more than one session."***
>
> ***"Country children need a bit more 'kindy' to break them into the school cycle, perhaps two days a week. It's hard for them to go from being 'farm free' to having to sit for five hours a day."***

"It would be great to have them more often for continuity of special themes or activities - little minds often forget what went on last week!!"

"Would have liked more - gives a better continuity in relationships."

"Could be three hours instead of two hours as you just get to enjoy the things they do when it is time to pack up again."

Parent Committees' Satisfaction with the Amount of Time

Parent committees were also asked the question 'How satisfied are you with the amount of time that the mobile unit is able to spend in your area?' The committees showed generally less satisfaction than individual parents with the amount of time that the units spent in each area ie 47% of the committees (representing all but the YWCA and Lakeland mobile units) gave a rating of either '1' = 'Not at all satisfied' (7) or '2' (10), compared to 32% for parents overall. Five committees (from the YWCA, Clevedon, Lakeland, Marlborough and Southland units) chose the mid-point of the scale while ten gave a rating of '4' and four gave a rating of '5' ('Very satisfied').

Committees from the Hunterville and Waimate mobile pre-school groups showed most satisfaction with the amount of time that the mobile unit was able to spend in their areas (ie four out of five responding committees from Hunterville gave a rating of '4', while five out of seven committees from Waimate gave a rating of '4' or '5' - the latter result closely reflecting the responses made by individual parents from the Waimate unit. (One of the two committees from Waimate which did express some dissatisfaction did so because they had just learnt that their group was to be disbanded because of diminished rolls.

Parent committees from the Thames mobile unit expressed greatest dissatisfaction with the time available (three of the four committees gave a rating of '1', while the fourth gave a rating of '2'). This may have been, in part, because three of the four groups visited by this mobile unit probably felt they were very well established (on account of the fact that they had worked to obtain their own buildings and considerable indoor and outdoor equipment) and were therefore in a good position to receive more sessions per week. (Respondents from one of these parent committees specifically stated that they intended to apply for permanent kindergarten status, partly because they had their own, recently opened building, and partly because they felt that their community was growing and could sustain a permanent kindergarten).

All but two of the 36 parent committees which responded added comments about how satisfied they were with time spent by the mobile unit in their area. Their comments fell into four main groups. Twelve committees (representing 7 mobile units) made general comments to the effect that their groups wanted and/or needed more time each week while seven committees (from the Clevedon (2), Marlborough (2), Thames, Hunterville, and Southland units) were more specific, stating that they felt older children (4 years plus) needed more pre-school experience and/or more time in order to prepare for school. A further five committees, less than satisfied with the time the mobile units were able to spend in their areas, made 'other' comments ie that when a group was not only visited infrequently but was also large, this meant less time for individual work with children (Southland); that an extra teacher was needed (YWCA); that because there was a large waiting list and their area was growing more sessions were needed (Franklin); and, that infrequency of sessions exacerbated the problem of trying to cater for the differing needs of a wide age range of pre-schoolers all at one time (Waimate).

Seven parent committees (from the Franklin, Hunterville, Marlborough and Waimate units) commented that they were generally satisfied with the amount of time allocated to their groups each week mainly because it would be too difficult - due to distance to travel - for many parents to attend more sessions each week. Finally, three committees (from Hunterville, Lakeland and Marlborough) stated that although ideally they would like more sessions they realised that their mobile unit could not manage this and they appreciated what they could get.

Other Pre-school Education Received by Children Attending Mobile Pre-school Units

Since it was known prior to carrying out the present study that, often, mobile pre-school units were only able to visit their various groups once or twice a week, it seemed relevant to ask parents, and parent committees, whether children received any other sort of early childhood education to supplement that provided by mobile unit sessions. Respondents' answers to this question are reported here because of a perceived relationship between the dissatisfaction, as expressed in the previous section, with regard to the time that mobile units were able to spend with each of their groups and the extent to which parents sent their children to other pre-school education facilities.

Parents' Responses

Four hundred and eighty seven (97%) parents responded to the question 'Does your child (or children) receive any other pre-school education on the days that the mobile van does not visit?'. Three-quarters of those who responded indicated that 'No', their child(ren) did not receive any other pre-school education while one-quarter indicated that 'Yes', their child(ren) were receiving other such education. It is possible that responses to this item may not give a fully accurate picture because many parents were aware that they were not 'legally' allowed to enrol their child(ren) in more than one early childhood education programme at a time. (A number of parents at several mobile units made informal comments to this effect to the researchers during the fieldwork visits.) Some may therefore have chosen not to report whether they also used another form of pre-school education, perhaps fearing that their children could be disadvantaged either by being prevented from attending more than one type of pre-school education programme and/or that the mobile pre-school unit might close if there was any suggestion that its services might not be essential in an area where alternatives seemed to be possible.

Table 5.7 shows the number of respondents from each mobile pre-school unit who said their child(ren) did or did not receive other pre-school education. The Thames parents recorded the least number of children attending other pre-school education facilities while the YWCA recorded the highest. This result for the YWCA is probably because parents there were primarily responsible for their own playgroups (with mobile unit teachers as facilitators), often running sessions on the days the mobile unit did not visit their group.

Table 5.7: The number of parents from each mobile pre-school unit who reported that their child(ren) received preschool education additional to that provided by the mobile units

	Yes, does receive		No, does not receive	
Mobile pre-school unit	N	%	N	%
YWCA	27	64.3	15	35.7
Clevedon	9	23.1	30	76.9
Franklin	16	29.1	39	70.9
Thames	2	4.9	39	95.1
Lakeland	5	20.8	19	79.2
Hunterville	11	22.0	39	78.0
Marlborough	16	27.1	43	72.9
Waimate	18	21.4	66	78.6
Southland	12	12.9	81	87.1
Total	116	(24%)	371	(76%)

The finding that around 25%[35] of the respondents' children attended alternative early childhood education programmes seems to reflect the dissatisfaction that many parents felt concerning the infrequency with which a mobile pre-school unit was able to visit their group and/or the brevity of sessions due to the mobile nature of the unit.

Parents who responded 'Yes' to this question were further asked to say what other pre-school education their child(ren) received and how often they received it. Most of this group of parents (46) said that their children were enrolled in another formal pre-school education facility, for example, a state or private kindergarten, the Correspondence School, Te Kohanga Reo, or a playcentre. Twenty-six parents said their children attended an informal pre-school programme such as a parent run playgroup, 13 that their children attended a creche or daycare centre and 12 that their children attended a mixture of alternative early childhood education facilities. A further 19 parents indicated that their children were involved in a variety of less usual alternatives, for example one or two children received visits from a teacher for the intellectually handicapped, some attended pre-school music groups, while others joined the junior class at a local primary school for a period each week as "a warm up".

Most parents (83) of children who participated in alternative early childhood programmes reported that their children attended one or two other sessions per week. A further seven parents reported that their children attended on an irregular basis while children of all but one of the remaining 14 parents were reported to attend between three and five sessions per week. (Twelve parents did not provide this information.)

Parent Committees' Responses

Around 11 committees thought that some of the children from their groups attended one or more alternative pre-school facilities (as discussed further below) from time to time (usually, informal playgroups) but most were unable to be any more specific.

Parent committees, in the hope of obtaining further information relating to possible alternative pre-school facilities in the areas served by mobile units, were also asked the question: 'Other than the mobile unit itself, are there any other provisions for early childhood education in your district (eg Nga Kohanga Reo, itinerant pre-school teachers, playcentre etc)?'. Unfortunately, a problem with this question became evident from the responses given ie the question did not specify whether 'district' referred only to the area from which participants in their own particular group were drawn or whether it referred to the entire area served by the mobile pre-school unit. Also, committees had different interpretations of what should or should not be considered to be in their 'district', with some mentioning pre-school facilities a great many kilometres away and some failing to mention facilities which were much closer to the area in which their groups were based. Another problem is that responses given probably reflected more the extent to which certain committees were or were not aware of the existence of other pre-school programmes rather than necessarily reflecting the true state of affairs. For this reason only an outline of the data yielded by this question is discussed here.

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[35] As already stated, this is to be a conservative estimate, both because parents may not always havew reported if their child attended an alternative pre-school education programme, and also because not all children who were attending mobile pre-school units at the time of the fieldwork are represented in the data from the parent questionnaires received.

Seventeen committees felt that there were no alternative pre-school education facilities in their district. Of the 18 which stated that there were alternative pre-school facilities most referred to the existence of playcentres in small towns in the broad vicinity, Nga Kohanga Reo (mentioned by North Island mobile units only), and kindergartens in more distant towns. A few also mentioned informal playgroups, often run as pre-entry groups, creches and privately run daycare centres. Two committees (from the Hunterville unit) stated that there was an itinerant (REAP) pre-school worker working in nearby districts while one or two referred to the availability of the Correspondence School. Of all the committees, respondents associated with the Marlborough and Waimate mobile pre-school units were least likely to say that there were alternative pre-school facilities available.

Parents' Perceptions of Teacher Helpfulness when Discussing Matters Concerning their Children

As a further indicator of the nature of the environment created by mobile pre-school units and the nature of the role of the mobile units with respect to parents, respondents were asked to rate (on a five-point scale) how helpful they felt teachers were if they wanted to talk to them about their children. The great majority (92%) of the 491 parents who responded to this item gave a rating of either '5' = Very helpful (75%) or '4' (17%). A further 7% (34) of respondents recorded a 'neutral' response while only four gave a rating of either '2' or '1' ('not helpful').

Twenty-one percent (104) of respondents added comments to their rating of the helpfulness of teachers when talking to them about their children. Seventy-three of the comments made expressed positive attitudes towards teachers. Two quotes which exemplify this are:

> ***"They [the teachers] most often open up a discussion before I would have the chance to ask, which shows their observance."***

> ***"I am greeted at the beginning of the session and when I pick the boys up the teachers always tell me how they've been and what they've done."***

Ten respondents qualified their 'neutral' ratings by explaining that teachers were not always helpful because they did not have the time available to spend with parents. Three of the respondents who rated teachers as less than helpful commented that they were disappointed with contact or that they felt teachers could be more approachable at times.

Eighteen parents gave a range of 'other' comments to qualify their response to the question, for example, they mentioned that they had never needed to talk to teachers about their children; that the parent library [ie books on parenting etc provided by the mobile pre-school unit] was helpful; that one teacher was more helpful than the other; that a recent change of head teacher had helped communication; and, that they [ie the respondents] were either new to the area or that, because they did not remain with their child during sessions, the opportunity had not arisen.

The Extent to which Parents Said They Helped at Mobile Pre-School Unit Sessions

The majority of the 485 parents who responded to the question 'Do you do any parent helping sessions when the mobile unit visits your area?' indicated that they did help, at least on occasions. More specifically, half of the respondents said that they helped 'Sometimes', just over one-quarter that they helped 'Often' and 17% that they helped 'Every (or nearly every) time the mobile unit visits'. Less than five percent of parents said that they did not help at all (Table 5.8). (In response to an earlier question which stated 'Do the mobile unit teachers encourage parents to take part in the programme as parent helpers?', 85% of respondents felt that yes, they were encouraged to do so.)

While personal commitments and inclination undoubtedly had a major influence on the frequency with which parents helped at sessions another major factor was probably that of teachers' philosophy and policy towards parental involvement with the mobile pre-school unit and its sessions. For example, while teachers at some mobile units preferred that just the parents (between one and three) rostered to help at each session remained, others encouraged all parents to stay and join in. There was also one mobile unit (Lakeland) which did not formally roster parents for duty at all, leaving it entirely up to parents to help if they could. All nine mobile pre-school units, however, made it a requirement that very young children - ie those who were not of official enrolment age - be accompanied throughout sessions by a parent, or other adult, who would take responsibility for supervising his or her charge. (Often, as well as supervising their own children, these parents would also become involved in other ways during sessions.) It is not clear from the way the question was worded whether parents were answering mainly (or entirely) in terms of how often they were rostered for duty (which would, of course, be affected by the size of the group that they attended) or whether they answered in terms of how often they helped overall, irrespective of whether it was their 'turn on duty' or not.

As shown in Table 5.8, the extent to which parents from different mobile pre-school units helped when the mobile unit visited their area varied considerably.

Table 5.8: The extent to which parents helped when the mobile pre-school unit visited their area

	'Not at all'		'Sometimes'		'Often'		'Every (or nearly every) session'	
Mobile pre-school unit	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
YWCA	2	4.9	13	31.7	12	29.3	14	34.1
Clevedon	1	2.4	23	56.1	16	39.0	1	2.4
Franklin	1	1.8	34	61.8	18	32.7	2	3.6
Thames	2	4.8	17	40.5	16	38.1	7	16.7
Lakeland	5	20.8	12	50.0	3	12.5	4	16.7
Hunterville	6	12.5	19	39.6	11	22.9	12	25.0
Marlborough	2	3.3	31	50.8	17	27.9	11	18.0
Waimate	2	2.4	25	29.8	28	33.3	29	34.5
Southland	2	2.2	71	79.8	13	14.6	3	3.4
Total	23	4.7	245	50.5	134	27.6	83	17.1

Between a quarter and two-thirds of respondents from the YWCA, Waimate, and Hunterville mobile pre-school units indicated that they helped at 'every (or nearly every) session'. Due either to the particular philosophy of the units and/or the physical isolation of many families, a high proportion of parents from these groups remained throughout sessions which would largely account for why so many said they helped on such a regular basis. (None of the mobile pre-school units, however, made it a requirement for parents to help out at sessions - except for strongly encouraging parents to participate in the parent roster schedule - which meant that although parents other than those on duty also remained throughout sessions they did not necessarily carry out particular tasks, but were free to observe, chat with the teachers and other adults, work with their own child etc.)

By comparison with the three mobile pre-school units mentioned above, only a very small minority of parents from the Clevedon, Franklin and Southland units said that they helped out at every, or nearly every, session. At the time of data collection, teachers from these three units usually preferred that parents who were not on duty did not remain during sessions. This may explain these results. Also, the fact that the largest group of parents from each of these mobiles said that they helped 'sometimes' very likely means that they were referring more to the times that they were on roster duty and less to when they helped out on a more casual basis.

Almost half of the respondents (47%, 233) added comments about the degree to which they helped during mobile unit sessions. More than half of those who commented (122) stated that they helped when rostered to do so, while 37 said that as well as helping when rostered to do so they also helped at all (or almost all) other sessions. Twenty-four commented that they stayed and helped at each session either because it was too far to travel home again and/or because they enjoyed helping and felt welcome to stay. A further 16 said that because they stayed to look after their own child (sometimes this was a requirement because of the young age of their child and sometimes it was simply because they chose to) they were usually able to help out in some way during sessions. Five of those who commented referred to the positive benefits for both themselves and their children which resulted from staying to help, while 17 respondents made a variety of 'other' comments about the nature and frequency of the help that they gave, for example, that they were involved with the parent committee, that they had only just begun attending sessions and had not yet helped out, that they usually helped unless too tired to do so in which case they just sat back and watched, that they would like to help more often but personal circumstances made it impossible, or that they were happy to help out but not on a regular basis.

A small number (12) commented that they were unable to remain and help at **any** sessions because of other commitments - employment, younger children to care for at home, and so on.

A selection of the types of comments that parents made in response to the question on the extent to which they helped at sessions follows:

"All mothers help clean and tidy up, and each have a [rostered] 'duty day' every 6-8 weeks."

"We have a roster for two mother helpers every session and if your child's under three you are required to supervise your own toddler so it's not interrupting older children."

"Parents already run the playgroup - the unit teachers just provide extra activities etc." [YWCA MPSU]

"We try to have only the mother helpers rostered on duty at the session as the building is small and there is no separate room for noisy parents."

"I help clean up most sessions, but help otherwise when rostered."

"There aren't organised helping sessions but more a case of helping on the day if necessary." [Lakeland MPSU]

"We have turns with morning tea and all help with packing and unpacking and joining in when needed."

"Not necessarily doing the activities with the children but just general run around things that usually occupy quite a bit of a teacher's time, so by helping them it leaves them free to concentrate on the children and the activity."

The Role of Parents During Mobile Unit Sessions, According to Parent Committees

The preceding discussion focused on individual parents' responses to a question which asked about the extent to which they helped during sessions. The following discussion presents parent committees' perceptions of the nature and extent of the assistance teachers expected from parents and their (the committees') views on the appropriate role of parents during sessions.

Parent Committees' Perceptions of What Teachers Expected or Wished of Parents During Sessions

Parent committees were asked: 'What role do you feel teachers expect or wish parents to play during visits of the mobile unit (eg do teachers expect/wish parents to help with 'housekeeping' tasks, to work with the children, or to choose for themselves whether or not they wish to be involved, etc)?'

The responses made were categorised under several headings and are presented in Table 5.9.

It is noticeable that most committees reported that parents mainly became involved in 'housekeeping tasks' (including unpacking and loading the van, setting out equipment at the beginning of sessions, preparing morning/afternoon teas, cleaning up etc). Although this is a pattern which closely resembles the type of help parents most often (for various reasons) seem to give in 'town kindergartens'[36] such help is particularly important in the case of mobile pre-school units, due to the travelling and time pressures imposed upon teachers. Most mobile unit groups relied heavily upon an efficient roster system (parents taking turns to be responsible for unlocking the building, preparing food and drink for children and helping in any other ways the teachers requested such as issuing library books, mixing paints, reading to a small group and so on) for the smooth running of sessions. (Although not all committees referred to the roster system in their responses to this item, all but the Lakeland mobile pre-school unit formally utilised parents in this way.)

Six committees reported that parents were expected to work with children as well as to undertake housekeeping tasks. However, as 'working with children' also included general supervision or overseeing of children this may be what respondents were most often referring to (although one committee from the Hunterville mobile pre-school unit said that teachers liked parents to take part in mat-times when the children were doing action songs etc). A further seven committees also specifically mentioned that teachers required that the responsibility for supervising/working with children below enrolment age be taken by the parents. (This applied at all mobile units, even though most committees did not directly mention this in the present context.)

In the majority of cases, apart from the expectation that parents organised themselves to ensure that there was always someone available to maintain the roster system and that the youngest children were attended by an adult, committees felt that teachers encouraged rather than expected parents to help out with housekeeping tasks and/or to take part in the sessions by working with their own or other children on activities. Only three committees (Thames and Southland (2)) felt that teachers preferred parents not to take part in activities: this belief was not offered as criticism, rather, these committees seemed to agree

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[36] Renwick (1989), for example, in her study of teachers and parents in kindergartens stated "...the 'helpers' we observed spent a high proportion of their time engaged in domestic tasks, either from choice or because they believed this was what was expected of them."(p109)

Table 5.9: Teachers expectations of parents during sessions, as perceived by parent committees

Committees associated with each unit	Teachers' Expectations Expect 'housekeeping' (eg, unpack/load van, set out equipment etc	Expect work with children (including general supervision*)	Expect parents to maintain roster system (eg, to prepare morning tea etc)	Encourage parents to do housekeeping	Encourage parents to work with children	Decision left to parents as to how they get involved (but are made to feel welcome)
YWCA • •	X X	X	X X			
Clevedon • •	X X	X X	X X			
Franklin • • • •	X X X	X X	X X X X	X	X X	
Thames • • • •		† †	X X X	X	X X	X
Hunterville • • • • •		X †	X	X X X	X X X	X
Lakeland •						X
Marlborough • • • • •	X X X	† X†	X X X X X	X	X X	X
Waimate • • • • • • •	X	† †		X X X X X X	X X X X X X X	X X
Southland • • • • • •	X		X X X X X	X X	X	

* When an 'X' is used in this column, this assumes parents were supervising and/or working with children old enough to be officially enrolled. When a '†' is used, this signifies that parents were required to take responsibility for their very young children themselves, rather than leaving them to the teachers.

Key 'X' is used to indicate when a committee specifically mentioned their belief that teachers wanted/hoped for a particular input from parents

'†' is used to indicate when a committee referred to parents being required to supervise children under enrolment age. (Even though not all committees mentioned it, this is a requirement at all mobile pre-school units) with the teachers' views, mainly because they felt that a lot of (noisy) adults - especially in a confined space - was disruptive for the children.

Several committees, mainly those from the Waimate mobile pre-school unit, remarked that parents had no need of special encouragement but were only too happy to help out in any way that they were needed, both because they enjoyed the work and because they wished to do anything which would help further the education of their children.

Parent Committees' Views of the Role of Parents During Sessions

Parent committees were further asked 'What role does the committee feel parents should play during visits of the mobile unit?' Most committees (31) responded by saying that they felt that the contributions parents were already making (which were described in their answers to the previous item as "supporting teachers", predominantly by helping with housekeeping activities, carrying out prescribed tasks when on roster duty, supervising children, and helping and/or working with the children if they wished) were appropriate ie the committees mostly agreed with what they thought teachers expected or hoped of parents. One committee simply stated that they thought parents could best help by doing "Exactly what the teachers ask for".

Three of the remaining five committees variously felt that the role of parents was: "to support each other" (Waimate); to "just [assume] a supportive role for their child" (Waimate); or "to help when possible but otherwise just relax and enjoy the sessions" (Marlborough). One parent committee from the Thames mobile pre-school unit felt that there should be no particular role for parents to play while, finally, one committee (which had previously stated too much was expected of parents) from the Marlborough unit wrote: "Parents should be able to leave their children in the hands of the teachers - not feel it is their job to look after their children."

Comments from two parent committees illustrate well the types of responses made by most of the parent committees (and many individual parents) associated with the mobile pre-school units:

> [On committee's perceptions of teacher expectations]:
> ***"Teachers expect housekeeping tasks to be accomplished first and foremost and these do take up a large proportion of parent time in a mobile kindergarten - getting out and putting away equipment, completely cleaning up afterwards. Secondly, teachers - depending on their own individual nature - mostly encourage parent involvement and assistance in teaching. (Our teachers expect every parent to***

assist but it is becoming increasingly difficult for all to oblige as more and more need to be employed during kindergarten time, to supplement the family income.")

[On committee's views of role parents should play]:
"The committee completely endorses the teachers' expectation of maximum parent involvement and actively tries to 'get around' situations where parents have to work or would rather not help. Suitable tasks are found for them so that all can be seen to contribute." [Clevedon MPSU]

[On committee's perceptions of teacher expectations]:
"The teachers leave the decision to us but at our unit we all help with everything regardless of who is on duty for that day and help any child that needs help with anything from swings play, to toileting, crafts and reading. The fact that we make the effort to get our children to the unit means we're interested enough to help their education."

[On committee's views of role parents should play]:
"Doing the above [ie helping at the session] as it is also a good learning experience for the parents as well. Because we have babies right up to five year olds everyone needs to help to make the session successful. We're [parents] busy most of the session too." [Waimate MPSU]

It would appear from the comments quoted above that parent committees, as well as teachers, could have an important part to play in encouraging and/or making it possible for individual parents to take part in a variety of tasks and activities during sessions, especially those involving interacting with children in more than just a supervisory capacity. Such parental involvement would not only facilitate the running of the programme in most cases but also benefit the parents as well although, as shown elsewhere in this chapter and throughout the report, many parents clearly valued the opportunity just to meet and chat with other parents, suggesting that there would need to be a balance to ensure that the opportunity for parents just to be together without necessarily having to take part in activities is safeguarded.

The Benefits to Parents from Being Associated with a Mobile Pre-School Unit

Because of the isolated nature of many of the communities served by mobile pre-school units it was felt that the existence of the units was likely to have a significant (positive) effect on the lives of many parents as well as on the children. It was felt that such benefits could result not only because parents would be pleased that their children were able to receive some degree of early childhood education but also because sessions would allow parents to interact with other adults. In order to obtain data to back our assumptions the question 'Do you think that (in general) you yourself benefit from being associated with the mobile pre-school unit?' was included in the parent questionnaire. Respondents recorded their answer, using a five-point scale ranging from 1 ('No, not at all') to 5 ('Yes, very much') and the mid-point designated a 'neutral' response.

Parents' Responses on the Extent to which They Benefited

Eighty-two percent of the 494 parents who responded (Table 5.10) indicated that they did benefit considerably from their association with a mobile pre-school unit. Of the remaining 90 respondents, 60 chose the mid-point of the scale while 30 felt that they themselves did not benefit directly from their association with the mobile unit. (Most of the relatively few parents who indicated that they did not really benefit were those who seldom if ever remained during sessions for one reason or another. It is, however, interesting to note that these parents did not seem to think that by having a child or children attend sessions where they learned new skills and behaviours and/or simply enjoyed themselves, and whereby they themselves were given a break from their children and so on was of personal benefit, albeit in a less direct way, perhaps, than that of mixing with other adults.)

As can be seen in Table 5.10, a large majority of parents from almost all mobile pre-school units (but most notably, Waimate) felt that there were benefits for them from being associated with a mobile pre-school unit. Parents from the Franklin and Southland mobile units were least likely overall to say that there were benefits for them, with more parents from these units than any others giving a rating of '1' ('No, not at all'), '2', or '3' (a 'neutral' response). A likely explanation is, again, that the teachers at these units did not encourage parents to remain during sessions, largely because of cramped conditions and excess noise (although in several of the Southland venues there was space available for parents to meet in a separate room, and this was something that quite a number of parents eagerly availed themselves of).

Table 5.10: The extent to which parents felt they themselves benefited from association with a mobile pre-school unit

Rating

Mobile pre-school unit	'5' ('Yes, very much')		'4'		'3' ('neutral')		'2'		'1' ('No, not at all')	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
YWCA	29	69.0	10	23.8	2	4.8	1	2.4	-	-
Clevedon	19	46.3	13	31.7	7	17.1	1	2.4	1	2.4
Franklin	20	35.1	14	24.6	14	24.6	4	7.0	5	8.8
Thames	22	52.4	11	26.2	7	16.7	2	4.8	-	-
Lakeland	15	65.2	6	26.1	-	-	1	4.3	1	4.3
Hunterville	34	65.4	11	21.1	4	7.7	3	5.8	-	-
Marlborough	34	55.7	16	26.2	7	11.5	3	4.9	1	1.6
Waimate	69	80.2	17	19.8	-	-	-	-	-	-
Southland	30	33.3	34	37.8	19	21.1	4	4.4	3	3.3
Totals	272 (55%)		132 (26.7%)		60 (12.1%)		19 (3.8%)		11 (2.2%)	

One-third (164) of respondents chose to add comments regarding the benefits for them personally of being associated with a mobile unit. Comments were mostly very positive. Ninety parents, for example, felt that they benefited socially from the contact with other mothers and the community in general:

> ***"When I was new to the area, although it took a while to get to know people, it has been through kindergarten [ie the mobile unit] that I felt I became part of the community and have made valuable friendships for myself and the children."***

Forty-four respondents made general positive comments about being associated with their mobile unit, such as:

> ***"I have found that being involved on the kindy committee has given me greater confidence and more experience in dealing with people, also an understanding of how committees are organised and lastly the importance of pre-school education."***

> ***"Yes, very much so because I believe a lot of people look down on solo fathers, or solo parents for that matter, but at the mobile pre-school unit they treat all of us the same, and that helps me a lot too."***

A further 18 parents commented on how valuable it was for them to have the opportunity to learn more about children from other adults and to gain ideas for working with children:

> ***"I pick up on ideas about the education of my child or can use the teachers as an on-hand source of information and advice. It broadens one's acquaintances and helps in getting to know parents of child's friends."***
>
> ***"I would never think of a lot of ideas they come up with and find them [the teachers] a mine of information."***
>
> ***"It is good to share parenting with other parents and teachers : helps solve problems you could be having."***
>
> ***"It is the only opportunity I have had to meet women the same age and family commitment as myself. It also does me good to watch how the teachers encourage and control the children."***

Seven respondents felt that it was children rather than parents who benefited most, while five said that they did not benefit either because they were in paid employment and unable to attend sessions or for other reasons such as:

> ***"[The reason I do not benefit is] very much due to the types of people living in this area - it's very parochial and I'm relatively new - the people seem shy and untrusting."***
>
> ***"It is a meeting place but only while dropping off or collecting children. We don't travel far, so we tend to go home during sessions."***
>
> ***"Only [benefit is] via the parent library otherwise no as we are left to our own devices."***

Parent Committees' Views on Whether Parents Benefited from their Association with a Mobile Pre-school Unit

Parent committees were asked whether they thought that, in general, parents themselves benefited from being associated with their mobile unit. The sorts of responses which resulted from the equivalent item in the parent questionnaire were again evident, with all but two committees indicating that they felt that parents benefited ie 30 committees, representing all 9 mobiles, answered '5' (Yes, very much') while four gave a rating of '4'. One of the two remaining parent committees chose the mid-point of the scale while the other circled '1' (No, not at all').

When invited to give reasons for their answers, 25 of the 28 committees which commented made positive general statements about the emotional and practical support parents received from each other and from teachers, the value of the workshops, outings and camps (YWCA) that were organised, and the social and other benefits arising from parents being able to meet with other adults and children. Two representative comments from committees are:

> ***"When parents are aware of day-to-day learning programmes they are able to reinforce learning in the home situation. Parents gain insights themselves from watching other adults teach their children and feel moral support and companionship by mixing with other parents. Kindergarten provides a meeting point for parents who may be from isolated areas."***

> ***"Most of us move to these areas not knowing many people, therefore the unit provides contact with others with similar interests and/or problems - great support for one another during rural or climatical crisis. For some, [it is the] only contact with other residents apart from one shopping day per week."***

Two committees qualified their ratings by stating that the degree to which parents benefited depended on how much the parents were able or willing to put in. One committee made a negative comment about parent involvement with the mobile pre-school unit, stating that it did not benefit parents because it was "very time consuming".

However, as can be seen from the great majority of responses, from both the parent and parent committee questionnaires, which said that parents did benefit from their association, the mobile pre-school units clearly did have a significant role to play with parents as well as with the children. It appeared that the opportunity for social contact with other adults, made possible on account of mobile unit sessions, was particularly important to parents in more isolated rural areas, and also to parents in urban areas (especially, those in the West Auckland communities served by the YWCA unit) whose circumstances made it difficult to make other contacts outside the home. There was also evidence from the comments which were made that parents often appreciated the opportunity to learn new ideas and skills for working and interacting with their children, and to watch how their child was progressing.

Talking to Teachers about Personal Problems or Concerns

Given that mobile pre-school units were developed to serve people living in more isolated rural and urban communities, where people do not necessarily have a great deal of opportunity for contact with others outside their immediate circle (especially with those regarded as 'trained professionals') it was felt that teachers may be regarded, at least by some parents, as 'significant others'. In order to gain some information about this possibility the question: 'If you ever want to talk to teachers about your own personal problems or concerns are they...[helpful/not helpful]?' was included in the parent questionnaire. A five-point rating scale ranging from 1 ('Not helpful') to 5 ('Very helpful') was then provided for respondents to record their responses. A 'Not applicable (do not talk to teachers about personal problems)' option was also given.

Seventy percent of respondents indicated, by circling the 'Not applicable' option, that they did not talk to teachers about personal problems. It is interesting to note here that there is an apparent discrepancy between what teachers said and what parents said - ie teachers frequently felt (see Chapter 3) that they spent considerable time talking with parents about their (the parents') personal problems. The present discrepancy may be because parents were not necessarily aware that they did share their personal problems as such and/or that they felt reluctant to report - in a questionnaire - that they did so, probably feeling that kindergartens were primarily for the children rather than for themselves. Alternatively, it may be that if teachers were spending considerable time with just a few parents in this way (especially in view of an already busy schedule) they may have felt that this was something they did with parents in general.

Of the approximately one-third of parents overall who did talk to teachers, most gave a rating of '5' or '4' while 21 gave a 'neutral' response. Only two parents indicated that they found teachers less than helpful.

Table 5.11 shows the number of parents, by mobile unit, who said they did or did not talk to teachers about personal concerns. It also shows (where applicable) how helpful parents found teachers to be. The mobile pre-school which was most notably different from the others was the YWCA unit, with less than half of the parents from that group saying that they did not talk to teachers about personal problems or concerns (compared to between 56% and 87% of parents from other units) and a comparatively large number saying that when they wished to share their problems teachers were helpful/very helpful. A major emphasis of the YWCA unit was 'empowering women' and helping parents deal with any problems - which probably helps explain the present data. Parents from the Thames unit were also less likely than parents from all but the YWCA unit to have given a 'not applicable' answer. This is one instance where parents' responses coincide more closely with what teachers said: during the observation week the teachers from Thames frequently mentioned spending time on personal matters with a number of parents.

Table 5.11: The number of parents, by mobile unit, who talked to teachers about personal concerns and their ratings of teacher helpfulness when talking about such matters

			Rating									
Mobile pre-school unit	'Not applicable (do not talk to teachers about personal problems)'		5 'Very helpful'		4		3		2		1 'Not helpful'	
	N	%	N	%[a]	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
YWCA	19	46.3	16	39.0	4	9.8	2	4.9	-	-	-	-
Clevedon	29	72.5	6	15.0	3	7.5	2	5.0	-	-	-	-
Franklin	47	87.0	3	5.6	3	5.6	-	-	1	1.9		
Thames	23	56.1	9	22.0	5	12.2	4	9.8	-	-	-	-
Lakeland	14	60.9	6	26.1	3	13.0	-	-	-	-	-	-
Hunterville	39	76.5	6	11.8	4	7.8	2	3.9	-	-	-	-
Marlborough	36	63.2	17	29.8	2	3.5	2	3.5	-	-	-	-
Waimate	58	68.2	20	23.5	4	4.7	2	2.4	-	1.2	-	-
Southland	74	81.3	8	8.8	2	2.2	7	7.7	-	-	-	-
Total	339	70.2	91	18.8	30	6.2	21	4.3	2	0.4	-	-

[a] The percentages given in the table with respect to ratings of teacher helpfulness are based on the total number of respondents from each mobile unit to this question (ie including those who answered 'not applicable' because they did not talk to teachers about personal problems) rather than on the much smaller numbers who indicated that they talked to teachers about personal concerns.

Eighty respondents added comments to their ratings of teacher helpfulness, with 36 of those who commented making references to positive qualities in teachers or the good rapport that had been built up:

> ***"The head teacher has a warm personality and always has time for parents to talk."***

> ***"Two other of my children have been through the mobile so the teachers get to know the whole family, which means generally can talk about problems, or even just them asking about all members of the family [is helpful]."***

Fifteen respondents reported positive experiences when bringing a specific child-related problem (which these parents clearly classified as a personal problem for them) to the teacher:

> ***"Good encouragement of trying to correct speech - also with child personal problems eg, health and walking."***

Thirteen respondents commented that they would not talk to the teachers about personal problems because they did not feel teachers were there for this:

> ***"I don't think that's what they are there for. They are there to help the kids."***

> ***"I wouldn't talk about my personal problems to them."***

Eleven respondents reported that they had never had the need to talk to the teachers in this way, while two commented that teachers were too busy and already had enough to handle:

> ***"The teachers have limited time - it should be spent with the children."***

Five parents made assorted 'other' comments , for example:

> ***"We get to know our teachers very well, often they live and socialise locally."***

As suggested by the parents' comments and the other data reported above, there was (not unexpectedly) considerable variation amongst parents in their reported need to talk to teachers (no doubt, largely dependent on what other avenues of support were available for individuals), and in what they were most likely to want to discuss with teachers. There were also some parents who apparently would have liked to talk to teachers but did not do so because they perceived either that the teachers were too busy and/or that it would not be appropriate for them, as adults, to take up valuable time which should be devoted to the children. However, of those who did discuss personal matters with teachers (144 of the 483 who answered this item) almost all felt they gained considerably from sharing their problems or concerns. Thus, although the proportion of parents who chose to talk to teachers in this way was relatively small compared to those who gave a 'not applicable' answer, teachers can almost certainly be regarded as significant (positive) figures in the lives of such people.

Opportunity to Talk to Teachers

As a follow-up to the item discussed above on the helpfulness of teachers when talking to them about personal concerns parents were asked if they had ever had 'difficulties getting an opportunity to talk to a teacher if you want to?'. Of the 479 parents who answered the item (95%) indicated that they did not have any problems while 5% responded that they did.

Parents who reported that they did have difficulties getting an opportunity to talk to a teacher were asked to specify what these difficulties were. Seventeen of the 26 respondents who had difficulties stated that this was because teachers were too busy either with the children, other parents, or with travelling between sessions:

> ***" They always look busy - I don't like to hold them up."***

The other nine parents made a variety of comments including inability to communicate with the teachers, not wanting to waste teachers time, difficulties in talking to the teacher without their child listening, and not feeling a need to talk to teachers.

Arrangements made by parents to talk to teachers

An additional open-ended item asked the parents who reported that they had had difficulties in getting an opportunity to talk to a teacher 'what sort of arrangements you usually make to meet and talk with teachers (either about your children or about personal concerns)'. However, perhaps because of the layout of the item in the questionnaire, a total of 76 parents answered this question, 50 more than the 26 who indicated having difficulties. Their responses were as follows.

Fifty-four of the 76 respondents said that they did not make any special arrangements but just spoke with the teachers during sessions times:

> ***"None. Only [meet and talk] if the occasion arises during a session."***

Ten parents specifically asked teachers for time, either during or outside session times; alternatively, they rang teachers in the evenings or during office hours:

> ***"I ask for a moment during the session and know they are always a phone call away."***

The remaining respondents did not specifically answer the item but simply made general remarks about teachers: nine made positive reference to teachers' willingness to talk, while three made more negative comments about communicating with teachers.

Parent Committees' Opinions of the Relationship Parents had with the Mobile Unit Teachers

In a question similar to one in the parent questionnaire regarding the helpfulness of teachers when talking to them about personal matters or concerns, parent committees were asked to indicate on a series of five-point semantic differential scales[37] the nature of the relationship parents (in general) had with their mobile pre-school unit teachers.

On the first of four scales, respondents were asked to say whether they felt parents' relationship with teachers was 'warm' or 'cool' or somewhere in between. Two of the other scales asked parent committees to rate the degree to which they felt the relationship between parents and teachers was 'close - distant', and 'personal - professional' while the remaining scale asked committees to rate whether they thought that parents, in general, 'know them [teachers] well - don't know them well'. Table 5.12 gives the results.

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[37] Refer to the explanation of semantic differential scales given in footnote 15 (p 47).

Table 5.12: Parent committees' ratings of the nature of the relationship parents (in general) had with mobile pre-school unit teachers

	Ratings (Semantic differential)										
	1		2		3		4		5		
	N	%[a]	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
'1 = warm'	18	50	12	33.3	4	11.1	-	-	-	-	'5 = cool'
'1 = close'	10	27.8	15	41.7	7	19.4	-	-	1	2.8	'5 = distant'
'1 = know them well'	10	27.8	13	36.1	11	30.6	-	-	-	-	'5 = don't know them well'
'1 = personal'	6	16.7	5	13.9	12	33.3	4	11.1	5	13.9	'5 = professional'

[a] **Note:** Percentages have been calculated as a proportion of the total number of parent committees (36) which responded to the survey. However, not all committees answered each scale: two omitted to answer the first scale, three omitted the second, two the third, and four omitted to answer the fourth scale.

Eighteen of the committees which responded to the rating scale items on the relationship between teachers and parents added comments. Eight of these made positive comments about teachers, for example:

> ***"The women are excellent at their work but do it in a manner that's compassionate and understanding. The children are very comfortable with them, as are the parents, and respect their wishes as discipline."***

Seven other committees made general comments: ie that the relationship parents had with teachers varied with individual teachers; that parents found it difficult to establish personal relationships with teachers when there were only one or two sessions per week; that the number of other parents limited the time available to individuals to spend with teachers; and that it was difficult to contact teachers outside of session times due to teachers' commitments to other groups, distance to travel and/or cost of toll calls in some cases. Finally, three committees qualified what could perhaps be seen as more 'negative' ratings by stating that parents had other commitments making it difficult to get to know teachers, that teachers did not stay long enough in the job to build up relationships, and that it took a while to get to know new teachers:

> ***"If we had the teachers more permanently we could get to know them better."***

Overall, responding parent committees seemed to feel that, on the whole, parents and teachers had a warm, positive relationship and that most teachers managed to successfully combine both a personal and a professional approach in their interactions with parents. As three parent committees (from three different units) commented:

> ***"[Teachers are] personable, professional people who are approachable."***
>
> ***"[Teachers have] a good mix of personal and professional traits."***
>
> ***"Hard to say whether it [parents' relationship with teachers] is mainly personal or professional - it's dependent on whether you want personal or professional contact - the teachers seem to be able to adjust to suit."***

The Extent to Which Teachers, According to Parents, Encouraged Parents to Meet and Talk with One Another

Because we felt that sheer logistics would make it difficult, if not impossible, for the mobile pre-school unit teachers themselves to talk, on a regular basis, with all parents at all of the groups that they visited, it was hypothesised that teachers would perhaps instead take steps to ensure that parents spent time talking to one another. For this reason, a question included in the parent questionnaire asked respondents whether the teachers 'encourage you to meet with other parents to talk about your children or other things'.

Approximately one-fifth of the 462 parents who responded to this question indicated that they were 'never' encouraged to meet with other parents, while 12% said that while they were encouraged this was 'hardly ever'. Forty percent indicated that they were 'sometimes' encouraged while just over one-quarter of respondents were 'often' encouraged. Table 5.13 shows the results by mobile pre-school unit.

Table 5.13: Parents' views, by mobile pre-school unit, on the extent to which teachers encouraged parents to meet and talk with one another

Mobile unit	Rating 4 'Yes, often' %	3 'Yes, sometimes' %	2 'Yes, but hardly ever' %	1 'No, never' %
YWCA	26.8	53.7	7.3	12.2
Clevedon	18.9	40.5	24.3	16.2
Franklin	3.7	27.8	20.4	48.1
Thames	35.9	33.3	10.3	20.5
Lakeland	31.8	31.8	13.6	22.7
Hunterville	34.8	45.7	2.2	17.4
Marlborough	36.8	38.6	7.0	17.5
Waimate	40.2	48.8	6.1	4.9
Southland	13.1	35.7	20.2	31.0
Totals (N)	98 (21.2%)	57 (12.3%)	185 (40%)	122 (26.4%)

Parents from the mobile pre-school units which tended to have the highest number of adults remain throughout sessions (the YWCA, Hunterville, Marlborough and Waimate units) were most likely to say that their teachers 'sometimes' or 'often' encouraged them to meet and talk with other parents. It would appear that such meetings between parents probably most often occurred during sessions, when parents were already together, rather than at some other time. (Refer also to data in this chapter which showed that few groups - except for those from the YWCA unit - ran additional sessions on the days that the mobile unit did not visit.) The finding relating to the YWCA unit probably reflects the philosophy of 'empowering women' at that unit which included helping parents to run their own groups, whereas the results for the other three units mentioned above (and to varying degrees, for the other units as well) may reflect the teachers' desire to not only facilitate interactions between parents but to ensure that parents (especially when there were large numbers present in a confined space) were happily occupied during session times, leaving them (the teachers) free to run the programme and spend more time with the children.

Forty-two of the parents who indicated that they were 'sometimes' or 'often' encouraged to meet with others added positive comments about their teachers and the value of meeting and talking with other parents.

The finding that one-fifth of respondents (mostly those from the Franklin, Southland and Clevedon mobile pre-school units) felt that teachers 'never' encouraged them to meet with other parents may largely have been because the teachers (and often the parents themselves) felt this was not necessary because parents already did this without any need to be prompted. (Fifty-five respondents overall made specific comments to this effect.)

Other reasons may have been because some of the teachers were relatively new to the area and were not yet acquainted with all parents; that at some groups many parents did not, or could not remain during sessions making it difficult for teachers to facilitate any interactions; teachers realised that parents lived too far from one another, or were too busy, to make further contact outside session times a practicality; or, that the teachers' existing job requirements made it difficult to do more to encourage parents in this way. Whatever the explanation for the present results, very few respondents expressed dissatisfaction about this aspect of their relationship with teachers, perhaps because they did not necessarily expect that this was something that teachers would do anyway. Finally, as shown in previous sections of this chapter, most parents seemed to feel that their relationships with mobile pre-school unit teachers were very positive.

What Parents Liked Best and What They Liked Least About Mobile Pre-school Units

Towards the end of their questionnaire parents were asked, in two separate free-response items, to write 'what you like best' and 'what you like least (do not like)' about mobile pre-school units. Although parents had already been asked their views about various aspects of their particular mobile pre-school unit earlier in the questionnaire these items were included in an attempt to get parents to draw together their predominant feelings about mobile units, whether positive or negative.

Responses to each of these questions are discussed in turn in the pages which follow.

What Parents Liked Best about Mobile Pre-school Units

Four hundred and eighty-one parents (96% of all respondents) answered this item, making a total of 1,000 comments between them. (Respondents were not asked to restrict themselves to just one point. For those who mentioned two or three aspects of mobile units that they 'liked best' no attempt has been made to rank order their responses. For present purposes, it is assumed that their responses, if not equally regarded, are likely to be reasonably close in terms of relative importance.)

Responses were analysed and grouped into several broad categories. Table 5.14 presents the types of comments that were made by five percent or more of all respondents.

Overall, the largest number of parents (52% of those who responded to the item on what they liked best about their mobile pre-school unit) commended the variety and value of activities provided, the access that the mobile unit gave children to activities and equipment not available at home, the well-designed programme which catered for children's individual needs, and children being taught personal and educational skills (independence, creativity, sharing etc) which would aid them in later life.

The next most frequently mentioned 'best liked' aspect of mobile pre-school units was the social contact with other children and with adults that was engendered for the respondents' own children (26%). This relates closely to the reason most often given by parents for using mobile pre-school units (page 194 ff). Comments in this category focused on the opportunities mobile units gave children to learn to be part of a group, to share, to mix with different ages from birth to five years, to establish friendships, and to relate to adults other than their parents on both a social and more formal basis.

A quarter of those who responded mentioned liking the teachers best. Respondents referred to particular teacher characteristics or personal qualities which were evident in their interactions with children and parents and in their overall running of the unit:

> ***"They are friendly and helpful when it comes to advice on play group activities. They join in with singing and action groups. They stimulate the mothers into participating with their children." [YWCA MPSU]***

The fourth category of responses relating to what respondents liked best, mentioned by 22% of parents, consisted of general positive comments about mobile pre-school units. These comments commended the mobile pre-school service in general, its suitability for rural areas, the positive/safe environment created, the enjoyment provided for children and that (in some cases) it offered an alternative to other types of pre-school education available. One parent, for example, commented:

Table 5.14: What parents liked best about the mobile pre-school unit with which they were associated

Best liked aspects	Mobile Unit																			
	YWCA		Clevedon		Franklin		Thames		Lakeland		Hunterville		Marlborough		Waimate		Southland		Totals	
	N	%*	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1 The programme, and the activities and equipment provided	36	87.8	12	30.0	19	38.8	13	31.7	8	33.3	21	41.2	28	48.3	56	65.1	55	60.4	248	51.6
2 The social contact for children with other children and adults	-	-	7	17.5	20	40.8	6	14.6	5	20.8	12	23.5	19	32.8	29	33.7	29	31.9	127	26.4
3 The teachers - their professional and personal qualities	17	41.5	9	22.5	7	14.3	9	22.0	10	41.7	17	33.3	4	6.9	15	17.4	35	38.5	123	25.6
4 The concept and nature of mobile units eg their suitability for rural areas etc	3	7.3	11	27.5	16	32.7	6	14.6	10	41.7	17	27.5	9	15.5	15	17.4	22	24.2	106	22.0
5 Children receiving preparation for school by attending mobile unit sessions	2	4.9	9	22.5	17	34.7	13	31.7	1	4.2	4	7.8	9	15.5	14	16.3	26	28.6	95	19.6

cont...

Table 5.14 continued

6 The availability of the mobile unit without which children would have no pre-school	3	7.3	8	20.0	7	14.6	14	34.1	5	20.8	9	17.6	15	25.9	13	15.1	15	16.5	89	18.5
7 The mobile unit being an integral part of the community/fostering community spirit amongst adults and children	8	19.5	10	25.0	6	12.2	10	24.4	-	-	9	17.6	10	17.2	20	23.3	5	5.5	78	16.2
8 The support, social contact and feeling of involvement that parents get from being part of the mobile unit	13	31.7	2	5.0	3	6.1	8	19.5	-	-	7	13.7	11	19.0	13	15.1	10	11.0	67	13.9
9 The small roll numbers which allow children more one-to-one interaction with teachers	-	-	5	12.5	-	-	4	9.8	6	25.0	4	7.8	-	-	1	1.2	4	4.4	24	5.0
Total No. of comments	82		73		95		83		45		97		105		176		201		957	
Total No. of respondents	41		40		49		41		24		51		58		86		91		481	

* Note: The percentages in this table have been calculated on the basis of the number of respondents from each mobile pre-school unit (and overall) and not on the number of responses.

> *"Warm friendly atmosphere, where children are encouraged, stimulated and helped in learning experiences, play etc. Helpfulness of the teachers and the positive atmosphere, giving confidence to me as a parent. Fabulous equipment - giving children the opportunity to learn and play with equipment and resources they couldn't get at home due to cost. Relating to and sharing with others their own age."*

Two others also commented in a similarly positive vein:

> *"The opportunity for many rural children to get pre-school education with qualified teachers and resources and equipment of a high standard, plus have social contact with other kids which is often difficult in country areas."*

> *"For isolated children and parents it is a vital link for learning, particularly socialising with other children and often the only form of pre-school education. The mix of formal and informal learning, especially for the younger ages - four and below - is appealing. Having not attended a large town kindergarten establishment I'm not in a position to know if ours compares favourably, or not."*

A further 18.5% of respondents (category 6 in Table 5.14) also commented positively about mobile pre-school units but were more specific in that they stated simply that the availability of the unit in their area was what they liked best about it. These parents commented on its handiness, on the fact that it was the only opportunity for a lot of children to attend a pre-school without which many rural children would miss out, and that it was vital for isolated areas, for example:

> *"The opportunity for my pre-schoolers to attend kindergarten in the rural situation. If it wasn't for the mobile unit, then there'd be no convenient (distance-wise) pre-school education for my children."*

Almost one-fifth of respondents liked their mobile pre-school because they felt it prepared children for school and for life outside the home. Comments included in this category covered such things as sessions introducing children to outside discipline and to a routine, and children being taught a wider range of feelings and attitudes. Other parents mentioned that mobile unit sessions provided their children with the chance to get to know the other children they would be attending school with and, through mixing with other children and adults, the opportunity to develop independence and confidence.

Sixteen percent of respondents liked the holistic social aspect of the mobile pre-school units best, ie that they involved not only the children, but parents and the community as a whole as well. Respondents referred to mobile unit sessions as being socially stimulating, and stated that children were kept well occupied, thus giving parents an opportunity to chat. This group of respondents also appreciated that the mobile pre-school unit was in their own area and that the local community owned the building, that all the children in the area were able to attend, and that there was cooperation amongst those who enjoyed its services with everyone 'pitching in' to help. The benefits to children from being able to see their parents involved during sessions, and the mobile unit bringing people together and helping to foster community spirit, were also mentioned. Representative comments are as follows:

> ***"I like the interest, enjoyment, learning opportunities and contact with other mothers/children in the area that the mobile kindergarten has given to my children and myself (husband too at fathers' sessions). Without the mobile kindergarten a lot of rural children would have no pre-school education available to them."***

> ***"It is a marvellous support system in the community. Our children are able to mix with other children and are getting a high standard of pre-school education. The teachers are very approachable."***

> ***"It provides a sharing educational atmosphere for children who in the country are generally isolated. It also provides a coffee session for mothers who basically do not get out visiting. For my children and myself it is the highlight of the week."***

In a closely-related category, the support, social contact, and feelings of involvement that parents gained through being associated with a mobile pre-school unit were specifically mentioned by 14% of respondents as the best thing about the units. The friendships that were facilitated, the opportunities to discuss thoughts and problems with other parents and with the teachers, the opportunities to learn new information and new ideas to take home and use with their children, the stimulation given parents to work with their children, and the enjoyment gained from being a parent-helper and being part of the mobile pre-school unit were all mentioned as well:

> ***"I think the aspect of meeting and mixing with other mums is great. I also like the idea that my daughter is getting some pre-school education. Parents can perhaps enjoy a second childhood once again and the children benefit from seeing their parents involved as well."***

The remaining aspects which parents indicated they liked best were the small numbers enrolled (mentioned by 5% of respondents) allowing more opportunity for one-to-one interaction and teachers having more time to spend with children overall. Thirteen (3%) respondents mentioned that visits by the mobile pre-school unit enabled parents and children to have a break from one another, while seven respondents appreciated that there were no waiting lists and that children of all ages were accepted, as were their parents. An additional four respondents commented on the positive benefits of children and parents from different backgrounds and cultures being able to mix at mobile unit sessions. Finally, 19 parents mentioned a diverse range of 'other' things that they liked about their mobile unit.

What parents liked best, by mobile pre-school unit

When looking at what respondents from different mobile pre-school units liked best (Table 5.14) it can be seen that a greater proportion of parents from the YWCA mobile unit than from any other unit mentioned liking the programme that was run and the activities and equipment which were provided. As mentioned elsewhere in this report, many of the groups associated with the YWCA unit were run mainly by parents, with the teachers acting as facilitators, giving ideas for activities and supplying/supplementing available equipment as required. The fact that the mobile pre-school unit teachers gave support in this way to parent groups may help explain this answer.

Large numbers of parents from the Waimate and Southland mobile pre-school units also mentioned the programme and activities/equipment as the aspect they liked best. Both of these units (particularly Waimate) were characterised by working to pre-planned 'themes' for sessions and having specific times set aside for stories, music and so on. It is apparent that these systems suited most parents in these areas very well.

It is interesting to note that the YWCA was the only unit where parents did not specifically refer to the social benefits for their children (category 2 in Table 5.14) as being something that they liked best. This may partly have been because the work of this unit was directed as much towards the parents as the children but, probably, a more likely explanation was that parents felt this aspect of their mobile unit was implicit in their other responses - for example, 51% of the YWCA respondents commented that they liked the way the mobile unit was an integral part of the community (category 7), and/or that both parents and children gained from their involvement with the mobile unit (category 8).

As stated above, when the closely related categories 7 and 8 were combined, it was found that just over half of the respondents from the YWCA valued the social contact and support made possible because of the unit. Between 30% and 44% of respondents from Thames, Waimate, Marlborough and Clevedon also mentioned these as aspects they liked best about mobile pre-school units.

One-quarter of respondents from the Lakeland mobile pre-school unit mentioned liking the small roll numbers best. Some parents living in or near Taupo itself chose to send their children to the mobile unit instead of to the permanent town kindergarten, which was also available to them, largely because of the smaller roll numbers (and sometimes also because there was not a long waiting list).

As would be expected, the aspects of mobile units that most parents liked best paralleled the reasons that parents were most likely to give for using the unit, and the comments that they made in response to items on teacher helpfulness, the benefits for them of being associated with the mobile unit, the learning environment provided for the children and so on. Of course, as with any free-response item, too much weight should not be placed on the figures which result but the data should rather be seen as a way of detecting more major themes or trends in the types of feelings or attitudes that parents are likely to express about mobile pre-school units.

What Parents Liked Least About Mobile Pre-school Units

When parents were requested to write 'what you like least' about mobile pre-school units, 61% (305) of the 501 parents who took part in the survey did so. Two hundred and sixteen indicated one aspect of the mobile units that they liked least, 61 mentioned two and 28 mentioned three least liked aspects: a total of 422 comments.

A further 49 respondents (10% of parents overall) stated that there was "nothing they did not like" about their local mobile pre-school unit, while 147 (29% of all respondents to the survey) did not answer this item. It is very likely (especially as 96% of parents commented on what they liked best about mobile pre-school units) that most of those who did not respond to this item probably did not regard the mobile unit with which they were associated as having any notable 'weaknesses'. For the purposes of the discussion which follows, therefore, those who failed to respond to the item and those who specifically pointed out that there was nothing they 'liked least' are treated as one group.

Table 5.15 shows both the categories of responses made by three percent or more of parents on the least liked aspects of their mobile pre-school unit and the number of parents from each area who did not respond/did not think the item was applicable.

Table 5.15: What parents liked least about the mobile pre-school unit with which they were associated

Category of response (ie least liked aspects of mobile units)	Mobile Unit																			
	YWCA		Clevedon		Franklin		Thames		Lakeland		Hunterville		Marlborough		Waimate		Southland		Totals	
	N*	%†	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1 Infrequency of visits and/or sessions not being long enough	10	23.3	9	21.4	16	27.6	10	23.8	9	37.5	10	19.2	16	26.2	12	14.0	45	48.4	137	27.3
2 The facilities available to meet in (eg buildings too small, cold, with inadequate storage, fencing etc)	-	-	9	21.4	7	12.1	14	33.3	4	16.7	12	23.1	3	4.9	3	3.5	2	2.2	54	10.8
3 The unpacking/packing up involved which wastes time, requires a lot of effort	-	-	10	23.8	10	17.2	6	14.3	-	-	3	5.8	10	16.4	2	2.3	2	2.2	43	8.6
4 Aspects of programme or activities provided	-	-	-	-	5	8.6	2	4.8	-	-	3	5.8	18	29.5	2	2.3	7	7.5	37	7.4
5 The restrictions imposed because of the mobile nature of the service ie general negative comments	2	4.7	6	14.3	3	5.2	2	4.8	1	4.2	5	9.6	7	11.5	1	1.2	4	4.3	31	6.2

cont...

Table 5.15 continued

6 Teachers (eg their lack of input into sessions, lack of interpersonal skills etc)	3	7.0	2	4.8	5	8.6	3	7.1	-	-	1	1.9	10	16.4	1	1.2	4	4.3	29	5.8
7 Lack of stimulation for older children, especially those near school age	-	-	-	-	4	6.9	2	4.8	4	16.7	1	1.9	3	4.9	5	5.8	4	4.3	23	4.6
8 The expectations put upon parents to fundraise, take roster duties, supervise children etc	-	-	4	9.5	-	-	6	14.3	-	-	2	3.8	1	1.6	1	1.2	2	2.2	16	3.2
Total of 'least liked' comments (N)	15#		40		50		45		18		37		68		27		70		370	
No. who made 'least liked' comments	20	46.5	30	71.4	40	69.0	33	78.6	15	62.5	30	57.7	44	72.0	30	34.9	63	67.7	305	60.9
Those who said there was 'nothing I did not like'	1	2.3	2	4.8	4	6.9	7	16.7	2	8.3	4	7.7	2	3.3	19	22.1	8	8.6	49	9.8
Missing	22	51.2	10	23.8	14	24.1	2	4.8	7	29.2	18	34.6	15	24.6	37	43.0	22	23.7	147	29.3
Total No. of respondents	43		42		58		42		24		52		61		86		93		501	

Note: * N = Number of comments made
† % = proportion of total number of respondents to the survey from each mobile unit (and overall)
# As only categories of responses made by 3% or more of respondents are included in the table (other comments are referred to in the text) this total is less than the number of parents who commented about least liked aspects.

As can be seen from the table, two-thirds of parents from the Waimate unit did not mention anything that they liked least about their mobile unit suggesting that, in general, this was a group of parents who were basically very satisfied with the service being provided. (Other data on this unit support this conclusion). The YWCA and Hunterville mobile units also had a large proportion of respondents (54% and 42% respectively) who did not mention anything they liked least.

Not surprisingly, in view of responses to an earlier question which showed that 48% of parents were less than satisfied (ie those who gave a rating of '1', '2', or '3') with the number of visits the mobile pre-school unit made to their group each week/fortnight, the aspect most often mentioned as least liked was that their mobile did not visit often enough and/or sessions were too short. This was particularly mentioned by respondents from the Southland mobile pre-school unit, one of the units where groups received only one session per week. Almost half (48%) of the respondents from Southland, compared with between 14% and 38% of respondents from other units gave this type of response. Twenty-seven percent of respondents overall made comments which referred, for example, to a lack of time which often resulted in only superficial cover of many subjects and the need to cram lots of activities into a short space of time. Some also mentioned that lack of time meant that they worried about taking up teachers' time with problems.

Approximately 11% of parents commented on problems with facilities. Some buildings were reported to be too "cramped" to allow children proper scope to pursue activities and/or too small for equipment to be stored, while other facilities were reported to have outdoor play areas which lacked fences, were too small, or which contained general hazards to children's safety. Some parents also mentioned facilities being cold, draughty, noisy, not as good as city venues, having toilet facilities which left a lot to be desired, and just being an unsuitable or inappropriate place to meet (eg the local marae). Parents' comments were along the following lines:

> ***"Some venues have been freezing in winter, impossible to heat, also dark and with very poor outside areas eg woolshed and yards."***
>
> ***"Cramped, stuffy conditions. Totally unsuitable in wet conditions. Children can't move inside when it is raining. I don't go [when it is wet]."***

Parents also frequently mentioned problems associated with not having a permanent building and having to share facilities with other community groups, for example:

> ***"Some of the children's time is wasted because of having to set up and put away the gear. A permanent building would eradicate this. Also some activities normally practised in kindergartens are not possible because of not being able to display things and having to put everything away after each session. A permanent building would also eradicate this problem."***

Parents who commented on inadequate facilities were predominantly from the Thames, Hunterville, Clevedon and Franklin mobile pre-school units, with the largest number (14) being from just one of the four groups visited by the Thames unit. These parents and their children met in a large, very dusty and cold hall which was situated on an extremely busy main road, a major concern for both parents and teachers:

> ***"The mobile unit is held in the Puriri hall which during winter is freezing. The hall is also situated by State Highway 26 which is very busy and there is always a concern by the parents and teachers that a child may escape on to this road."***

> ***"The mobile unit itself is fine but where we have it is a big cold hall with very little outside area for play. It is situated on the main road and the doors have to be kept locked. So it is really the venue that I like least."***

Rather surprisingly, no respondents from the YWCA unit commented on this aspect of their mobile unit despite some groups meeting in garages, private houses with limited space, etc.

Forty-three parents, most of whom were connected with the Clevedon, Franklin and Marlborough units (10 parents each) where the teachers perhaps expected more of parents than did teachers at some of the other units, commented that they did not like unpacking and packing up the van, either because of the effort involved or because of the session time that was wasted:

> ***"Not having our own building - thus having to set up and pack up every session - that means set up and pack up every single thing - we can't even hang a picture on the wall. No one minds cleaning and tidying up, but what we do is ridiculous."***

No parents from the YWCA mentioned this as a concern for them, nor did any parents from the Lakeland mobile pre-school unit, probably because at the latter unit the teachers took responsibility for doing almost all of the unpacking/packing and setting up of equipment for the sessions themselves.

Just over seven percent of respondents were critical of certain aspects of the programme and/or activities offered. They commented about programme content, lack of variety in activities, too much play and not enough teaching/structured time, lack of induction for new children, lack of preparation for school, and lack of encouragement for parents to become involved. One such comment was:

> ***"I do not like the lack of discipline. If a child wants to spend the whole session in the sandpit, he does! He could do that at home. My child is not learning anything about painting, reading books, listening to stories or any other group activity."***

In a closely related category, a further 23 respondents specifically stated that they felt there was insufficient time and/or extension work given to older children, especially those close to school age:

> ***"I feel that more time could be spent with the older children in more teaching."***

General negative comments about their mobile pre-school unit were made by around 6% of respondents. Most comments pertained to the consequences of the units being mobile in nature. Respondents referred to the problems associated with a continually changing staff; the constant time pressure resulting from the necessity for teachers to drive between venues, unpack and repack the van, drive to the next venue....etc; problems getting venues approved; the lack of day-to-day continuity; some groups receiving less of the mobile unit's time than others; teachers being overworked/tired by the end of the week when they come to a session (which was a particular disadvantage when groups met only once a week); the restricted number of books available for loan from the unit; and, there not being enough mobiles in New Zealand. Some of these parents commented as follows:

> ***"The fact that quite a bit of the session is taken up with unloading and loading the van and that things cannot be carried on from one day to another as others use the building in between. So lack of continuity of ideas in some cases."***
>
> ***"Pictures and creation cannot be put up on walls etc to create a bright, happy environment. The time it takes to set up and put away reduces the length of sessions for the children. Hard to obtain continuity from day to day. Unable to provide as wide a range of activities as a conventional kindergarten."***

> ***"The continuous changing of the pre-school teachers that visit - as the children get used to one then another one comes along which takes the shy children a while to get familiar with."***
>
> ***"At times the teachers appear 'stretched' to their limit with managing and organising all their different 'kindy' places."***

Around six percent of respondents mentioned "teachers" as the aspect of their local mobile unit that they 'liked least'. Parents were very individual in what they did not like and teachers were, for example, criticised for: not making enough suggestions for activities parents could do at home with their children; not offering more in general for parents (ie lectures, outings, discussion, introductions); telling parents how to fundraise; being apathetic and not sufficiently involved; not communicating well with parents (eg "teachers' reluctance to treat parents as intelligent human beings!"); spending too much time talking to parents instead of working with the children; having stale ideas; their general teaching style; not relating to children on a personal level; not taking stronger disciplinary action with children; expecting too much of parents; and, not respecting parents' ideas and input enough.

A small group of respondents (3%) felt that too much was expected of parents. The duties that these parents mentioned as being burdensome included the cleaning roster, and cleaning up at the end of the term, fundraising, having to supervise younger children, having to stay for the whole session, and having to be rostered as the 'mother help'. Several parents commented that these tasks seemed even heavier because most work seemed to fall to a minority of parents. Some of the comments included:

> ***"Fundraising. Meetings. Cake baking. In a small rural community most services exist because of fundraising/voluntary work by residents. Our school (32 pupils) requires greater parental involvement because of small numbers of parents. The health clinic, again run by a voluntary committee, and also church activities all take time. Kindy fundraising for 5 hours weekly sometimes seems unnecessary."***
>
> ***"I don't like having to fundraise constantly to be able to purchase new equipment. More government money could rectify this!"***
>
> ***"Other parents who won't help clean up etc. Mobile kindy being treated as a convenient baby sitting service. In general, no complaints with the kindy itself, it is generally the attitude of certain parents that displeases one."***

"Having to supervise my child all the time because he is younger than the others."

A number of other categories of responses were made by even smaller numbers of respondents. Six parents disliked the distance they had to travel, six felt that the programme offered by the mobile unit was limited due to it having to be aimed at such a wide range of children, four disliked having to share equipment with other groups visited by the mobile unit, especially as they felt that permanent kindergartens were better equipped, four were displeased that their groups had a waiting list, and two respondents mentioned being dissatisfied with not being able to enrol their children in another early childhood education facility as well as at the mobile pre-school unit. A further 28 respondents made other 'one-off' comments, these covering a wide range of individual dislikes from the lack of male company to talk to (mentioned by a regularly attending father), the hint of closure for mobile units, the local kindergarten association's "couldn't care less attitude", to the comment from one parent who stated:

"Clay and fingerpaint and a wet sandpit and frosty winter mornings."

At least four of the most commonly mentioned 'least liked' aspects (ie categories 1, 2, 3, and 5 in Table 5.15) can be attributed largely to the itinerant nature of mobile units and to their having to serve a large number of groups over a wide geographical area. To some extent, categories 4 and 7 can also be attributed to the units being mobile in nature, making it difficult to provide a wide range of activities and to maintain continuity in tasks/themes and so on, although obviously other factors, such as teacher input, play a major part as well.

What Parent Committees Saw as the Major Strengths and Weaknesses of Mobile Pre-School Units

While parent committees, unlike individual parents, were not asked what they liked 'best' or 'least' about mobile units they were invited to respond to two very similar questions ie to state what they thought were the 'major strengths' and 'major weaknesses' of the mobile unit in their area. (Overall trends in the responses made by both individual parents and the parent committees on what they felt were the best and worst aspects of mobile units were very similar.) Parent committees' responses to their particular questions are discussed separately below.

Major Strengths of Mobile Pre-school Units as Identified by Parent Committees

All but three parent committees identified what they felt were 'major strengths' of their particular mobile pre-school unit. As shown in Table 5.16, the largest number of committees (representing all but the YWCA and Lakeland mobile pre-school units) felt, first and foremost, that the fact that the mobile unit was **available** in their communities was its greatest strength, for example:

> ***"The rural children are able to get the pre-school education which would be otherwise difficult or impossible for them to have. The teachers live relatively close to areas and can identify with the children and any characteristics pertaining to that area ie in less accessible areas the children don't get much outside contact even with other children and so have different needs to children who live near to town and have other children who they mix with." [Waimate MPSU)***

Other committees praised the activities and equipment provided, plus the nature of the pre-school programme overall (the committees giving this response represented the Waimate (3), Hunterville (2), YWCA, Clevedon and Southland units); the opportunities for parents to interact with other adults (Waimate (3), Lakeland, Clevedon, Marlborough and Hunterville); the teachers; the support given the mobile unit by parents and the community generally (Clevedon, Franklin, Thames, Hunterville (2), Waimate and Southland); and, the opportunities for social interaction afforded children, especially those in more isolated areas (Lakeland, Hunterville, Marlborough, and Waimate (3) units).

Four committees (two each from the YWCA and Waimate units) appreciated the support that parents received (from teachers and other parents), either from being able to share problems or topics of interest in a friendly, relaxed atmosphere, or from having the opportunity to acquire knowledge and information about parenting, child development, and so on.

Table 5.16: Strengths of mobile pre-school units as mentioned by parent committees

	Strength	Number[a] of committees which mentioned strength N
1	The availability of the unit without which children in the area would have no pre-school education	15
2	The activities/equipment provided; the quality of the programme offered	8
3	The opportunities for social interaction (with other parents and with teachers) provided for parents	7
4	The teachers - ie that they are trained professionals, friendly, caring, good with the children, resourceful, etc.	7
5	The commitment and input from parents and the community generally to the success of the units; parents supporting teachers	7
6	The opportunities for social interaction provided for children	6
7	The support given parents by teachers and other parents; the parenting advice and knowledge gained; being "made to feel very welcome".	4
8	The flexibility, adaptability of the mobile unit (eg coping with a wide age range of children and groups very different in nature)	4
9	The low teacher-child ratio allowing for more one-to-one interaction	3

[a] Some committees mentioned more than one 'strength'.

The committees (representing the Thames, Hunterville, Marlborough and Waimate units) which liked the flexibility and adaptability of their mobile unit commented in the following vein:

> ***"It is flexible in its approach so that there is a more family-centred emphasis with smaller children and babies being able to participate." [Thames MPSU]***

and,

> ***"The unit is very adaptable as every group is so different." [Marlborough MPSU]***

As well as the three committees (from the Clevedon and Hunterville (2) units) which appreciated their children being able to receive more individualised attention from teachers (on account of small group size), two committees mentioned that small or non-existent waiting lists were a major advantage of mobile pre-school units.

Other committees (9) made a series of 'one-off' comments on what they considered were major strengths of their mobile unit, for example:

> ***"The mobile unit's proximity to the majority of homes for our group." [Clevedon MPSU]***
>
> ***"Good organisation and communication between all the committees." [Southland MPSU]***
>
> ***"The mobile pre-school unit is a friendly well-organised group." [Southland MPSU]***
>
> ***"Its [ie the mobile unit's] existence as a back-up for our playgroup. Parents get information on women's issues and health, guidance and advice, the opportunity to attend women's camps and workshops. [Provides] a much needed grant [for our playgroup]." [YWCA MPSU]***

Major Weaknesses of Mobile Pre-school Units as Identified by Parent Committees

Twenty-six parent committees identified one or more weaknesses of the particular mobile unit with which they were associated.

A further four committees (from the Clevedon and Waimate (3)) units stated that there were no weaknesses (eg "we cannot think of any weaknesses") while six (from the Hunterville, Marlborough, Waimate (3) and Southland units) did not answer this item, again almost certainly because they felt there were no 'major weaknesses'.

Of those which did identify weaknesses almost all gave the two closely related aspects shown in Table 5.17 ie that their group was not allocated a sufficient number of sessions each week and/or that session times were not long enough. (Committees which answered in one or both of these ways represented all but the Lakeland mobile pre-school unit).

Table 5.17: Main weaknesses of mobile pre-school units as mentioned by parent committees

	Weakness	No. of committees which mentioned weakness
1	The group does not receive a sufficient number of sessions each week	16
2	Sessions are not long enough because of teachers having to go on to another group and/or because of the unpacking and repacking of the van involved	11

Two committees (Thames, Hunterville) mentioned that not having their own facilities was a major weakness because it prevented children's art work from being displayed, and limited the nature and extent of activities that could be attempted.

Nine committees also made a series of individual or more general comments, for example:

> *"Being of no fixed abode it is difficult for them [the teachers] to establish themes for working with. Not enough resources." [Thames MPSU]*

> *"Teachers are under pressure to 'get there' [ie to the next group] despite distances over quite tricky and densely trafficked roads." [Franklin MPSU]*

> *"Not enough teachers to support all of West Auckland. Occasionally we don't get a visit due to other groups' pressure on the unit." [YWCA MPSU]*

> *"Many pre-school parents still have to travel a considerable distance to become involved in the kindy." [Lakeland MPSU]*

> ***"Perhaps more communication between individual mobile groups [needed]." [Marlborough MPSU]***

> ***"Lack of continuum of teacher staff [makes it] difficult to build a relationship. Familiarisation between parents, teachers and children is not fully exercised." [YWCA MPSU]***

> ***"The widespread nature of the sessions [ie location of groups] and so much time spent travelling." [Hunterville MPSU]***

> ***"Not often enough - but more than twice a week and attendance may drop. Travel must take a toll on the teachers therefore would be interesting to see how long teachers stay on the bus [mobile unit's van] - but new teachers bring new ideas etc - so we gain from it." [Hunterville MPSU]***

A final comment from one of the parent committees seems to sum up well the sorts of weaknesses identified and the reason, perhaps, for most of those weaknesses:

> ***"The nature of being mobile has limits." [Marlborough MPSU]***

As a follow up to parent committees' views on the strengths and weaknesses of their mobile pre-school units, committees were also asked if there were any particular changes to the units that they would like to see made. Their answers are discussed in the section which follows.

Changes that Parent Committees Would Like to See in Relation to Mobile Pre-School Units

In response to the question 'Are there any changes you would like to see in relation to [your] mobile pre-school unit?' almost all (16) of the 18 committees which answered 'Yes', not unexpectedly - in view of the major weaknesses of mobile units identified in the previous section - said that they thought their group should be visited more frequently by the mobile unit and/or that sessions should be longer. (The committees who answered in this way were from the Thames (3), Southland (3), YWCA (2), Clevedon (2), Franklin (2), Hunterville (2), Marlborough and Waimate units). Their comments included, for example:

> ***"More regular visits would enable our playgroup to exercise all our needs to the full." [YWCA MPSU]***

> ***"If the Education Department provided more funding we might see them more often." [Franklin MPSU]***

Six committees mentioned 'other' sorts of changes they would like to see, or gave a combination of one or more changes:

> ***"We want more teachers and another visit per week. Would like some parent/teacher talks on skills, development, parenting, child abuse etc." [YWCA MPSU]***

> ***"We would like to become permanent." [Thames MPSU]***

> ***"[Have] established bases for all the groups (own buildings). Mobile travelling between with large, expensive equipment and twice as many visits per week. More teachers." [Thames MPSU]***

> ***"More outside equipment to be made available to all sessions." [Hunterville MPSU]***

> ***"Two sessions per week per venue. More government money for better equipment." [Marlborough MPSU]***

> ***"More sessions for the children. Also perhaps more availability of activities we could take home for our children to learn from." [Waimate MPSU]***

Sixteen committees (from the Waimate (6), Hunterville (3), Franklin (2), Marlborough (2), Southland (2) and Lakeland units) stated that there were no particular changes they would like to see, while two committees did not respond.

Other Comments from Parents About Mobile Pre-School Units

A final item in their questionnaire asked parents if they would like to make any further comments about their mobile pre-school unit. One hundred and fifty-five (31%) parents chose to do so. A large number (109) of those who responded to this item did so in a positive vein. A sample of comments (representing all of the different units) follows:

> ***"I feel that every country area in New Zealand should have a mobile unit because it provides such good pre-school education, and means that children do not have to be taken long distances to attend a kindergarten. Because of the nature of mobile kindy, very young children attend as well, and the mothers are involved too. This***

makes for a better learning situation for everyone - parents are helped to learn ways to encourage their children, and children begin learning at a very early age. It seems to me that more of this type of 'cooperative education' would benefit the entire community, but it is especially important in country areas where other educational facilities are too far away."

"I feel our unit teachers are very sensitive concerned people, who try to cater to every child they deal with. I've seen them get a very shy boy to speak (who won't normally) and they encourage every child to be themselves, they don't laugh at their attempts to do things no matter how silly, nor are they overly harsh when things go wrong. I admire their work and their efficiency - I think our mobile unit is definitely a plus for the community - I would hate to see it go."

"Would like to compliment teachers on their efforts to bring us together with town groups and special visits. Impressed with teachers' knowledge of children and families and the encouragement they provide. Also think it's important that babies through to school age be included in sessions in this kind of situation as it's a great support for country families with young children."

"The mobile unit is the centre of the community for mothers and pre-schoolers. It is a terrific introduction for new families coming into the district - a chance to meet everyone. Because of the relaxed warm atmosphere parents feel free to share their problems, ideas or even recipes. The mobile unit is an excellent service that the community needs."

"I think it is an excellent service for rural communities especially for areas where distance would stop anyone going to an ordinary town kindergarten. The service provides everything a child would get in a kindergarten only it is closer to home and it also provides an opportunity for the parents to get together as well. And also as previously mentioned a full age range from birth up to five years where older [children] learn to play with younger and vice versa. The theme that is provided by the teachers each week - even though it might be hard on them to think of something different each week - I think is excellent to give the children something to work to."

"The unit is a great asset to any rural community and it is a pity there cannot be more of them as I have got as much out of it as my children in the area of meeting people around you, people you wouldn't otherwise see on a weekly basis. Because you have to stay for the length of kindy your younger children not yet kindy age also *get a great deal of benefit from it. As this is sometimes the only chance for a mother at home to see anyone other than the children in a lengthy period it makes for saner mothers therefore happy children."*

"I feel my children have gained a lot from attending the mobile kindergarten. The teachers are very caring and warm people and seem to relate well to the children. Having the mobile unit visit means we are not missing out because we live in the country. It is a great start to the school environment."

"As a teacher of a sole charge school the difference between those children who attended the mobile unit and those who are unable to is quite noticeable. It is a shame the unit does not visit our immediate district and therefore reach more children and families. The work the mobile unit does in the rural communities is definitely first class, much needed and much appreciated by those attending."

"I have found the mobile kindergarten a great benefit to all members of my family. The children have gained pre-school education that would otherwise not be available to them. My husband has attended fathers' sessions which always seem to be enjoyed very much by both children and fathers and I have enjoyed meeting other mums in the area and working with the children. Our kindergarten at Kawakawa Bay is now well established with a lot of equipment bought through various fundraising activities and is a wonderful asset to our community. Lots of fun and learning opportunities for both parents and children - keep up the good work!! We have had 'open days' when local people, grannies etc, are asked to attend a session and these days are always well attended and a lot of favourable comment is received back from those who attend. The older members of the community always seem to really enjoy these days - many of those who attend have no family attending the unit but love to come and see what the children are doing."

"Two years ago I used to think the mobile unit was a waste of time, they seemed to have very little input into our group. I personally didn't know their [the teachers'] names even. Since getting our new teacher, I've certainly changed my views. Her first visit to our group she introduced herself, and explained her role as a YWCA mobile unit teacher. She spends time with the children and knows all their names. When new mothers arrive she introduces herself and explains what she does. Consequently, our Friday mornings can be so busy (sometimes 16-17 mums come) and new mothers keep coming back. We were finding a lot only came one time, and

the committee were thinking of cutting down to one day per week. Now our 'problem?' seems to be we don't have enough room."

"I feel they provide a much needed service to the community and fill a large gap in the childhood pre-school education. I find this invaluable as my son is the oldest with a baby brother and without this service he would not come in contact with other children his age (as we have just moved in and don't know anyone with children)."

"I believe this is a cost effective way of allowing rural children to experience pre-school education. I would say I was quite fussy about what my children experience and have been happy with the Hunterville mobile. A lot of what is offering depends on staff; the unit could be ineffective but is doing a good job."

"It is nice to have pre-school teachers available to our children. They are people with different outlooks to those our children usually encounter. Often in rural areas children aren't encouraged to develop any differently than the generations before. I value our pre-school and wish that more did the same. I think - rural - children need all the assistance they can get to equip themselves for life in 2000 and it begins before they reach school. It is pleasant to be included in their education even if it is as an observer at the sessions. You can then continue it when you are at home by facilitating their experiences."

"Why do small groups have to close down when their numbers drop. The pre-school unit is very valuable to country children. It is probably the only time all week they have contact with children their own age. Nowadays with the economic downturn parents are unable to afford to buy equipment etc to help with pre-school education and the mobile unit is a Godsend to these parents. So please don't close down units [ie, individual groups within mobile units] when their numbers drop. Our older three children attended mobile pre-school. It was a great grounding for these country children. Our second youngest child started his pre-school education with the mobile but when he turned four the unit [group] closed up due to small numbers, we then drove 30 kms to our rural town so he could finish his pre-school education. He did not like it. In a class of 40 children he was not encouraged to do activities or join in and as a result missed out. He loved the mobile unit. Our mobile unit [group] is closing down next week. As a result our youngest child will not be able to finish his pre-school education through the unit. We can't afford now to travel to our rural town every day for him to attend kindy. As a result he is going to miss out on that valuable time and education."

> ***"All I can say is that it was the best thing that happened to our boys and our community. Without the mobile unit they would have had no pre-school education. Would also like to praise the teachers, especially the head teacher of our unit, for their high standard. Very approachable, helpful, encouraging and so stimulating, with a good relationship with all parents and children. We have been very privileged to have them. They have added so much to the success of the unit."***

The tone of the positive comments about mobile pre-school units (and their teachers) seems to be well summed up in the following quote:

> ***"I think it's a valuable and educational service. Long may it continue!"***

Seventeen of those who made 'other' comments reiterated (see discussion on p.202 ff, of parents' views about the time the mobile pre-school unit was able to spend in their areas) that they would like to have more sessions each week:

> ***"It's a pity that we can't get another session as the teachers on the van do such a good job and keep the children interested from week to week. But time is short so some things get missed out eg no time for music, games, ball skills, etc. With another session these could be incorporated."***
>
> ***"My daughter has just started school, 9-3pm and from one morning a week of kindy to 5 days was pretty hard for her, that's where I feel the city kindy children have the advantage of adjusting better to school."***

A further six parents who were dissatisfied with the time available stated that they felt they should be able to enrol their children in more than one pre-school programme at a time. The Correspondence School early childhood education programme was specifically mentioned:

> ***"I was a primary school teacher and have taught five year olds and found that children who had little or no pre-school education were at a severe disadvantage when they started school. I am concerned that children are not allowed to attend the mobile unit and receive correspondence material at the same time as I think this would be most beneficial. I do not consider one session a week (with the mobile unit) to be sufficient pre-school education but most necessary for social development and I think together with the correspondence course most complementary."***

> ***"I did have a child on Correspondence Kindergarten and think he should have been able to attend some of the mobile sessions to gain social skills which he lacked when he started school. There should be more flexibility in the system for isolated children who may need and use both services instead of either Correspondence or mobile kindergarten for a once weekly session. I realise children are funded for one pre-school form of education, still that places limitations on a child's basic needs. If I had a choice I would like to be affiliated to both. A twice-weekly facility [ie on the mobile unit] involves too much travelling for us. Thank you for giving us the opportunity to give our views."***

Eleven parents who responded to the item expressed criticisms of a more general nature; for example:

> ***"Having read these questions it makes me feel that our mobile unit is not quite as 'family' or 'personally' oriented as it could be. I do not feel at all involved with the mobile unit and hence never feel encouraged to be so. As stated before, although my daughter has been going for 18 months I do not feel she is known as an individual nor do I feel inclined to discuss any matters concerning her upbringing or developmental stages with her teachers."***

> ***"Really, for the older children (4+ years), once a week is not sufficient in my view. Next term I hope to take my four year old into [town] to the kindergarten there [as well]. There are already two other mothers in the district doing this so this will cut down on travelling. It is 24 kilometres from our home to [town]. I would not do this if I could not work in with the other mothers."***

> ***"I feel the children need more direction to get the most out of the two hours - it can't be as much free choice as the town kindergartens. Messy play is difficult to provide I'm sure in all the different venues but I feel it plays an important daily role as does music daily - not just singing but movement - also exploring different spaces, mediums, access to instruments - imagination should flow during a music session. More dressing up equipment is needed for acting and playing make-believe - but with the limited time the children can't really get the feel of it. On the whole, the children are not extended enough, especially nearing five - I know it is difficult with all the different age groups but the unit should have lots of number and reading equipment ready to keep these children occupied, not bored."***

Finally, 14 respondents expressed more personal observations or concerns and/or highlighted that mobile pre-school units are a mixture of positive and negative qualities:

> ***"The mobile van is a very worthwhile and necessary service which should be expanded. Sessions should be longer [as] so much of the two hours is used loading and unloading the van before anything else happens. If the van is late, this situation is made worse. Also, the success of the whole enterprise is dependent upon a very careful selection of teachers."***
>
> ***"Our sessions could be a lot bigger in numbers if all the farm folks came with their kids - why don't they bother? Please don't wipe mobile units, they are very valuable and much looked forward to by mums and children."***
>
> ***"The mobile unit in our area has proven very beneficial to both my children and myself and I am proud to be associated with it. I just wish I could encourage more of my friends in the area to consider using it but despite putting forward a very positive point of view regarding the mobile kindergarten most prefer to wait until their children are almost four when they can attend a town kindergarten - several kilometres away I might add!!! Perhaps we need more promotion at a departmental level?"***

PART III : THE ROLE OF PARENT COMMITTEES IN THE RUNNING AND/OR ORGANISATION OF MOBILE PRE-SCHOOL UNITS

Parent committees or groups were asked a number of questions about their role with respect to the running of their mobile pre-school unit. The next sections discuss parent committees' responses to each of these questions in turn.

The Role of Parent Committees in Ensuring that there was Suitable Accommodation for Children to Meet In

Thirty-four parent committees responded when asked what role they had in helping to ensure that suitable accommodation/facilities were provided for the children. The sorts of responses given by individual committees seemed to depend to a large extent on the nature of the community in which they were based and on whether there was any choice of meeting place available for their group amongst existing buildings in the area.

Three of the four parent committees from the Thames mobile pre-school unit, for example, stated that they had a major role to play with respect to the accommodation and facilities that were available for their group. Not only were they responsible for providing all outdoor equipment and for cleaning and maintaining their buildings both inside and out, but they (and the wider parent group from each venue) had also been responsible for the buildings themselves, having raised the necessary money entirely through their own efforts. One of these committees commented:

> ***"The committee has built and maintains the building and grounds, it has been a big project which has been financed by fundraising alone."***

Two other committees (from the Franklin and Waimate mobile pre-school units) stated that they (in consultation with all parents from their groups) were responsible for choosing where their group should meet each week. More (7) parent committees (from the Hunterville, Southland and Clevedon MPSUs), however, felt that instead of having full responsibility for deciding on venues, they were rather part of the decision-making process eg they made recommendations about where sessions should be held, and liaised with the mobile unit teachers, the local kindergarten association and/or the Department of Education until a final decision was reached. A further seven parent committees (from seven different units) answered that they had no particular role as the venue for their group had already been decided some time in the past (five of these committees indicated that the available facilities were suitable for their purposes; the other two were less satisfied, but stated that alternative accommodation was not readily available.)

Other committees (from all nine mobile pre-school units) wrote that although they did not necessarily have a role in deciding where their group should meet they had a large part to play in ensuring that buildings continued to be available for their group to meet in, and for keeping buildings clean and safe for children. Seventeen committees, for example, stated that they regularly fundraised to pay for the hire of their building and to buy equipment necessary for the smooth running of sessions and/or that they took responsibility (eg by arranging a parent roster system) for ensuring that the venue was kept clean and tidy both inside and out and that any necessary maintenance work was seen to. Two representative quotes are as follows:

> ***"We are part of the decision-making process. We almost invariably come up with the options [of where to meet] ie we find the woolshed, house etc if a [previous] venue is deemed to be unsuitable. We also scrub the place down and do those tasks which make a place habitable for children." [Hunterville MPSU]***

> ***"[The committee has] quite a major role. We rent an old house which has to be maintained and kept clean (and rodent free). We mow the lawns weekly and when major jobs are required to be done ie painting, constructing swings etc we have working bees and the fathers help. If anything needs financial aid we raise money to pay the bills eg a new heater." [Waimate MPSU]***

The Role of Parent Committees in the Provision of Suitable and Sufficient Play Equipment

In answer to a question on what role they played 'in helping to ensure that suitable and sufficient play equipment (including outdoor equipment such as sandpit, swings etc) [was] provided for children' attending mobile unit sessions all but seven of the 35 parent committees which responded indicated that they had an active role with respect to the nature and extent of equipment available to children. In most cases (20 committees from eight mobile units), the role that the committees had was to fundraise and then, usually after consultation with teachers and/or other parents, to buy such equipment as had been agreed upon. For example:

> ***"We have a chairperson, secretary and treasurer who manage funds, organise fundraising, liaise between non-committee members, teachers and the YWCA regarding activities, equipment etc parents may want." [YWCA unit]***

Two committees also said that they took responsibility for maintaining existing equipment in good order while a further six committees (from the Thames, Lakeland, Marlborough (2), and Southland (2) mobile units) said that their specific responsibility was to provide outdoor equipment for their group - either by buying what was needed or by having members of the community make what was required:

> ***"Recently we developed our own sanded area with swings, slides, see-saw etc. We did this with our own money and voluntary time." [Marlborough MPSU]***

Two committees (from the Thames and Marlborough units) indicated that they had total responsibility for buying whatever equipment they felt was necessary for their particular groups. (These were groups with their own permanent venues and they were therefore able to leave any equipment which they bought in their building between sessions.) By contrast, however, six parent committees (from the Hunterville (1), Waimate (2) and Southland (3) units) felt that they did not currently have a particular role in relation to the supply of equipment either because they met within school grounds where all outdoor equipment was already provided and the rest of what was required was supplied by the mobile pre-school unit itself or, in the case of the two Waimate groups, because previous committees had ensured that a good supply of play equipment had already been built up.

As can be seen from the results, parent committees, in general, had much more say with regards the purchase and provision of equipment for their groups than they had (in most cases) about where their group should, or could, meet. Many groups were able to supplement, from their own supplies, the materials brought on the mobile unit's van.

Parent Committees' Role in Deciding Mobile Pre-School Unit Itineraries

In response to the question 'What role does the committee have in deciding what the mobile unit's itinerary should be (ie how are decisions made about how often the mobile unit visits your area and about the particular day(s) that it visits)?' 23 of the 36 parent committees (representing all nine mobile units) stated that they had no role whatsoever. Although most of these respondents made no further comment about their lack of input into this aspect of the running and organisation of the mobile pre-school unit, two committees commented:

> ***"We have no say at all, and fit in with them but are quite happy about this, as it takes pressure off us." [YWCA unit]***
>
> ***"These decisions are made by the senior kindy teachers in Rotorua*** [note that this may just be this committee's perception of who made the decision]. ***Consideration of the harsh winter climate we experience is thought of and [the] afternoon sessions [which they have scheduled] are more suitable than coming out on icy mornings on the roads." [Lakeland MPSU]***
>
> ***"We have no say whatsoever. All decisions are made in Blenheim by an executive committee who we all feel know nothing about living in the country areas." [Marlborough MPSU]***

The remaining 13 committees (from the Hunterville (4), Marlborough (3), Waimate (5) and Southland units) felt that while they did not have complete say about the mobile pre-school unit's itinerary they at least felt they had some input into the final decisions that were made, for example, they offered suggestions and discussed possible changes of itinerary with the teachers and made submissions to the mobile pre-school unit's management committee. Most realised that the entire area served by the mobile unit had to be taken into account when drawing up itineraries and therefore tried to cooperate with teachers and those 'higher up':

> ***"The committee has their say but it is very difficult to decide who has what days (I think this decision should be up to the teachers as they know what groups they can travel to without backtracking and missing lunch breaks." [Marlborough MPSU]***

> ***"We fit in with the other regions so that the best travelling routes are available for the teachers." [Waimate MPSU]***

The finding that parent committees overall did not have a great deal of say in deciding their mobile unit's itinerary is not surprising given that, as some committees obviously realised, it is clearly essential that any schedule be worked out on the basis of the relative location and specific characteristics and/or needs of all communities served by the mobile pre-school units and not be based purely on the wishes of individual groups.

Additional Sessions Run by Parent Committees on the Days that the Mobile Unit Did Not Visit Their Group

Because the itinerant nature of mobile pre-school units means that individual groups must necessarily be restricted in the number of visits they can receive from their unit each week (an aspect of the mobile units that many parents/parent committees repeatedly indicated they were unhappy about), it was decided to investigate whether the parent committees associated with individual groups took responsibility for running additional sessions themselves on days that the mobile unit did not visit their area.

When the question of whether they ran additional sessions was put to the parent committees, only five (from the YWCA (2)[38] , Franklin, Thames and Marlborough mobile units) said that they did run such sessions. The committees which did not run additional sessions gave one or more reasons for not doing so. Their reasons are categorised in Table 5.18 below.

Two committees gave reasons other than those listed in Table 5.18 for not running sessions - one stated that other people in the community ran a separate playgroup which mobile pre-school children could attend if their parents chose, while the other felt that it was up to parents generally if they wanted extra sessions and not a particular role of the parent committee to organise these.

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[38] Only two committees from the YWCA unit are referred to here as running additional sessions, a considerable under-estimation (due to the remaining nine committees or parent groups from this unit not returning completed questionnaires.) At the time of the fieldwork all groups from this unit ran their own sessions on the days that the teachers did not visit - the only mobile unit where additional sessions occurred to such an extent. As explained elsewhere in this report this was because of the rather different philosophy of this unit.

One committee (from Waimate) further stated that although it did not presently run such sessions, it was intending to do so because the mobile unit was soon to cease visits to the group (on account of diminished roll numbers).

Members of the committee from one of the most isolated Marlborough groups also stated that they were considering running sessions themselves as long as they could overcome problems of lack of equipment and the cost of additional hall rental: "Money is always a problem."

The evidence suggests that although many committees (and individual parents) claimed they were unhappy with the number of sessions that their children received from the mobile unit each week this did not lead many groups of parents to run additional sessions themselves. Apart from difficulties such as the distance to travel, and parents being committed with farm and other work and home activities, problems such as a lack of equipment and a place to meet could probably be overcome if parents really wished it. Failure to run additional sessions, therefore, in most instances may be more a case of parents relying rather heavily on the guidance, expertise and general input of the teachers, and a preference for leaving the ultimate responsibility for sessions to the teachers. Some further support for this, perhaps, comes from the data (p.209 ff) which showed that around 25% of children from mobile units were also attending other formal or semi-formal early childhood education programmes, often at considerable cost and inconvenience to parents (because of distance to travel etc).

The committees which ran sessions themselves were asked how happy they were with the extent to which teachers helped them to do so. Four of the five groups to which this question applied indicated that although they valued the ideas that teachers contributed (the fifth committee said that it would have appreciated more "input and guidance") and their occasional help with equipment such as dough and paints, they felt that teachers were just too busy to become any more involved in sessions additional to those they ran themselves as part of the mobile unit's itinerary. The whole question of the desirability - and feasibility - of parents running sessions for their children to supplement those provided by mobile pre-school units appears to be a potentially important issue, given that the present mobile units are stretched to the point where they are unable to provide individual groups with more time, and given that most rural children do not have the benefit of the time available to many children who attend kindergartens or other early childhood education programmes in towns or cities. Also, if as it appears, parents want or need more guidance from teachers to instigate and maintain sessions which they run themselves, some strategies would need to be developed to enable teachers to cope with the demands that this would entail.

Table 5.18: The reasons parent committees gave for not running additional sessions on days when the mobile unit did not visit

Reasons for not running additional sessions	No. of committees which gave each reason
Lack of equipment necessary to run sessions	8
Parents have too far to travel to attend additional sessions	8
Parents have not expressed a wish for such a service	6
Parents have too many other commitments to be able to devote time and energy to run additional sessions, especially without teacher assistance	5
Parent apathy/lack of response	5
Lack of facilities available in which to meet	4
The committee has never thought of running additional sessions	3

Parent Committees' Role in Advertising Mobile Pre-School Units

The majority of responding parent committees indicated that a major part of their role with respect to advertising their mobile pre-school unit and/or encouraging parents to bring their children to sessions was simply that of informal contact with other parents, either face-to-face or by telephone. Sixteen committees, however, stated that, as well as, or instead of, such "word-of-mouth" contact they took a more active role, advertising by means of school and other newsletters, notices in letter boxes, posters on community notice boards, dairy windows and in Plunket rooms, and by means of messages broadcast over the local radio station. Some groups also held 'open weeks' to welcome new parents to the district and to ensure that they were provided with any information they might require about the mobile pre-school unit.

One of the Hunterville parent committees wrote with regard to its particular role:

> ***"We are brilliant at ferreting out the people who live round about and bring them to sessions. The committee more than staff [teachers] would have local knowledge to achieve this."***

Three other parent committees stated that it was not necessary for them to advertise eg because they already had lengthy waiting lists.

Other Input by Parent Committees Into the Running and Organisation of Mobile Pre-School Units

In answer to the question 'Does the committee have any other input into the running and organisation of the mobile unit that you have not already mentioned above?', 17 of the 34 committees which responded said 'No', they did not. The committees which answered in this way represented seven of the mobile units.

Of the 17 which answered 'Yes', several (5) repeated roles (such as fundraising to pay rent and to buy equipment, keeping indoor and outdoor play areas clean and tidy for the children, and maintaining equipment) already mentioned in the previous sections. Five other committees specifically stated that their committee was also represented in the mobile unit's management committee, hence they felt that the group was able to have some input into the overall running of the mobile pre-school unit rather than just their own group.

One further committee mentioned that part of its role was to liaise with the local kindergarten association, another that it acted as a mediator between parents and teachers if there were any complaints from either side or some problem with the running and organisation of the group. Three committees stated that they took responsibility for organising trips and special activities (such as a picnic or 'trikeathon') for parents and children in their groups from time to time, while four also mentioned that they organised the mother help roster (this, however, was a role carried out by almost all parent committees - see for instance, discussion on pages 219-220 above).

Parent Committees' Ratings of Satisfaction with the Extent to Which Parents Were Involved in the Running and Organisation of the Mobile Units and in the Programme Provided for their Groups

The previous five sections have discussed parent committees' responses to questions which tried to establish the nature and extent of committees' (and therefore parents') involvement in the running and organisation of their mobile unit group. This section focuses on whether committees were satisfied with the amount of involvement that parents had.

Satisfaction with Parental Involvement in the Running and Organisation of the Mobile Unit

In response to the question 'How happy are you with the extent to which parents are involved in the running and organisation of the mobile unit?' committees recorded their responses on a five-point rating scale, ranging from 1 ('Not at all happy') to 5 ('Very happy'). The mid-point of the scale was designated a 'neutral' response. (Note that committees unanimously took the question to mean the running and organisation of their own particular **group** and not the mobile unit overall, which was more the responsibility of the management committee.)

Some committees (11) chose to add comments to their answer on the rating scale and from such responses it is apparent that respondents interpreted the question in two different ways: first, that the question was asking them to say how happy they were with the opportunity for parents to get involved (the intended meaning) or second, that the question was asking them to rate how happy they were with the extent to which parents did, or were willing to, get involved. For this reason, no firm conclusions can be drawn from the information obtained. The results are, nevertheless, presented after the following quotations which represent each of the ways - described above - in which the question was interpreted.

"Very happy with what we are allowed to do. The problem is getting mothers to become involved." [Represents first interpretation. The comment is from a Franklin committee which gave a rating of '5'.]

"We all seem to have a place in the scheme of things." [First interpretation; from a Hunterville committee which again gave a rating of '5'.]

"Some parents are working and have limited time to give. Parents in general work extremely hard for kindergarten." [Represents second interpretation. Quote is from a Clevedon committee. A rating of '5' was given.]

"Some mothers are more enthusiastic than others." [Second interpretation; from a Waimate committee which gave a rating of '4']

The data which was obtained revealed that most (28, representing all but one of the mobile units) of the 35 committees which responded were generally happy with the extent of parents' involvement in the running and organisation of their group ie they gave a rating of either '5' or '4'. Four committees (from the YWCA (2), Franklin and Marlborough units) gave a rating of '3' while three committees (from the Thames (2) and Marlborough units) gave a rating of either '2' or '1' ('Not at all happy'). (From other information obtained on the mobile units it is likely that one of the two Thames committees which indicated being less than happy did so because the group had recently acquired its own new building and wished to obtain permanent kindergarten status rather than continue to be part of a mobile unit, while the second committee may have answered in the way that it did either because not all parents from this group helped as much as they could and/or because the group was generally very dissatisfied with the facilities they were required to meet in and had not yet been able to effect a move. The Marlborough committee had previously expressed considerable dissatisfaction about its lack of say in how often, and for how long, the mobile unit should visit their group each week.)

Satisfaction with Parental Involvement in the Mobile Unit's Programme

In a related question, 'How happy are you with the extent to which parents are involved in the programme during visits of the mobile unit?' committees recorded their response on a scale identical to that used in the previous item. Although there was some evidence from comments made by a few of the 21 committees who chose to elaborate on their rating scale answers that this question was again interpreted in two different ways, most seemed to answer in the way intended ie in terms of satisfaction with the opportunity for parents to be involved in the programme that the mobile pre-school unit ran for their group.

Twenty-nine committees, representing all nine mobile pre-school units indicated that they were 'very happy' or 'happy' with the extent of parental involvement in the pre-school programme run for their group. Five committees gave a 'neutral' response while two committees gave a response of either '2' or '1'. (The latter two committees, from the YWCA and Thames units, respectively, gave quite opposing reasons for their negative ratings: the former stated ***"We would rather be involved in the activity, making the session more interesting for all"*** while the latter wrote: ***"Parents should not be involved at all.")*** The following are examples of quotes from committees who indicated being generally happy with existing arrangements for parents to get involved during sessions.

> ***"Parents can join in and help if they choose to, if not there is no pressure put on them to do so."*** [Marlborough MPSU; a rating of '5' was given]
>
> ***"Some mothers desperately need to have a break from being constantly hassled (by young children!). We are grateful to teachers in that situation for not involving us too much. However, they do make use of us if we can do the odd thing for them. We supervise our under 2 $^1/_2$s."*** [Hunterville MPSU; rating = '5']
>
> ***"Parents are welcomed and involved. Rosters of parents to help."*** [Thames MPSU; rating = '5']
>
> ***"We are quite happy - we all oversee our own children as parents must stay with their children."*** [YWCA MPSU; rating = '4']
>
> ***"The teachers prefer the mothers to go outside [or into another room] while a session is in progress eg [because] the noise level is too high with mothers talking."*** [Southland MPSU; rating = '5']
>
> ***"This is usually left to the staff but parents are welcome to contribute ideas at committee meetings."*** [Clevedon MPSU; rating = '5']
>
> ***"We can be involved totally if we wish or are asked for help."*** [Waimate MPSU; rating = '5']

"We are always welcome to stay and take part in any sessions." [Franklin MPSU; rating = '5']

Recent Changes in Communities Which Had an Affect on Mobile Pre-school Units, as Reported by Parent Committees

As a crude measure of the continuing need for mobile pre-school units to visit existing groups (ie at the time the fieldwork was carried out), parent committees were asked whether there had been any recent changes in their area (eg changes in employment/unemployment, families moving into or away from the district etc) which had had or were likely to have soon, an affect on the mobile unit eg in terms of roll numbers, the type of programme that was run and so on.

Nineteen committees (representing all but the Lakeland MPSU) reported that there had been no notable recent changes in their communities and that mobile unit roll numbers were stable (and often high).

The remaining 17 committees felt that there had been definite changes in their communities, with seven (from the YWCA, Franklin, Thames, Hunterville, Marlborough and Waimate (2) units) saying that their communities were growing, and that families with young children were moving into the district and boosting the mobile group's roll numbers.

Four other committees (from the Hunterville, Marlborough, Waimate and Southland units) reported that their groups had decreased a little in size in recent months due to some families moving out of the district on account of rising unemployment.

Two committees (Thames and Lakeland) said that rolls sometimes fluctuated because a portion of the population in the area was transient (ie sharemilkers' and itinerant farm workers' families).

A further two committees (Waimate and Southland) said that the composition of their mobile group had recently changed because older children had graduated to school and remaining children were all under four years, thereby affecting the nature of the programme that was run.

The remaining two committees mentioned other changes which they felt had affected their particular mobile unit groups:

> ***"The necessity of both parents requiring incomes to support the family has meant (a) less parent help and/or difficulties for those parents to arrange for someone to do their duties and (b) we do not think there are very many children involved but some children who would otherwise attend kindergarten are being taken into full-time, private daycare." [Clevedon MPSU]***

The other committee (from the Waimate mobile pre-school unit) stated that the rural downturn had caused parents to be even keener supporters of the mobile unit so that they and their children had a place to meet:

> ***"With the rural downturn and drought and flood related stresses of the last few years we've found parents have made even more effort to continue the contact with the unit despite their problems. It's too beneficial to both kids and parents to sacrifice."***

The results from this question seem to reflect the status quo for mobile units since their instigation in the 1970s - ie that groups in different communities come and go but that there is a continuing need and demand for the existing mobile pre-school units throughout each of the broad areas in which they are located.

The Early Childhood Education Needs, According to Parent Committees, of Mobile Pre-School Unit Children (and their Parents)

In reply to the question 'What do you think are the major present early childhood education needs of pre-schoolers (and their parents) in your area?' parent committees gave a range of responses very similar to those given by individual parents when asked to state their major reasons for using a mobile pre-school unit (see p.194 ff) ie most committees (29) reported that it was most important for children to have the opportunity to interact socially, in a variety of situations, with other children (and with adults outside their own families). Twenty committees also mentioned the importance of children being able to participate in a stimulating programme with a good range of activities and equipment. Other reasons given included the importance for parents of having contact with, and support from, other adults (6 committees), and the need for children to receive some preparation for school (5).

In general, committees felt that the needs that they had identified were being well met by their mobile pre-school units although 21 of the 36 committees would have preferred it if the mobile unit could have visited their group more frequently. Three of these committees (two from Franklin and one from Thames) stated that they had a strong preference for their own permanent kindergarten so that children could attend each day. (Committees identified a similar range of needs in response to a second question on the 'future' early childhood education needs of their particular communities, many again reiterating a desire for their children to be able to attend sessions more often, especially older children nearing school age.

Other Comments from Parent Committees about Mobile Pre-School Units

At the close of their questionnaire parent committees, like the individual parents, were invited to make any further comments they wished on mobile pre-school units in general and their own mobile unit in particular. Thirteen committees chose to comment: nine made very positive comments, two were also generally positive except for specific limitations which they mentioned, while two committees made more negative comments, one about the hazard to children from a nearby busy road at their venue, and the other that the staff member at their local kindergarten association was 'rude' and uncooperative.

Examples of some of the comments made follow:

> ***"We appreciate the warmth/friendliness we receive from our teachers and their support. We feel the children benefit from this personal involvement and it helps them to adjust much better when they go from playgroup to kindergarten to school." [YWCA MPSU]***

> ***"The mobile kindergarten is a valued and integral part of our community. It plays an important role in many varied and diverse ways and first and foremost gives rural children the essential high quality pre-school learning so needed in today's educational system." [Clevedon MPSU]***

> ***"The mobile unit does a good job but every parent feels even one extra session would benefit our pre-schoolers." [Franklin MPSU]***

> ***"We would not like to see the mobile unit withdrawn as our pre-schoolers need the education offered to them." [Franklin MPSU]***

> ***"From ages 1 to 3 it is excellent. From ages 3 to 5 more involvement with reading and set activities [needed].." [Thames MPSU]***

"It's a marvellous service - no one can put the value of what it does for the children, and the mothers, aside. Literally, rural communities need these services. Other areas could do with a mobile unit." [Hunterville MPSU]

"We think that the need for these units must be great in other parts of New Zealand. Thought should be given to making more of these available as they provide a wonderful service to a rural community that has lost so many of its other support services." [Waimate MPSU]

PART IV : SUMMARY

This chapter has considered mobile pre-school units from the point of view of parents: parents of all children attending a mobile pre-school were invited to comment on aspects of mobile units such as the quality of the learning experiences they felt were provided for children, how happy their children were at sessions, how satisfied they were with the amount of time that the unit could spend in their particular community each week, and what they liked best and least about their mobile pre-school unit. Parents were also asked to comment on their relationships with teachers, the extent to which they helped out during sessions and whether or not they felt they **themselves** (ie as distinct from their children) benefited from association with a mobile pre-school unit. As well, the parent committees attached to each group visited by mobile units were asked to provide information on the nature and extent of parents' involvement in the running and organisation of their mobile pre-school unit.

A major finding from this chapter was that many parents (at least one-third) expressed considerable dissatisfaction with the amount of time that mobile pre-school units were able to spend in their communities. Although there were parents who indicated that they appreciated the reasons they were not able to have more, and/or longer sessions each week (ie because their group was only one of several the unit had to visit), a recurrent theme in comments made by those who expressed dissatisfaction was that country children were disadvantaged when compared to their town or city counterparts, in terms of access to pre-school education.

Despite dissatisfaction with the amount of time, however, almost all parents indicated that they valued highly the service provided by mobile pre-school units, believing that some pre-school education experience for their children was a great deal better than none at all.

Respondents not only valued mobile units for the sake of their children but for themselves as well - a majority (82%) of parents indicated that they benefited greatly from the opportunity to meet and talk with other adults (noting that this was something that would otherwise have been possible only rarely due to living in an isolated area etc), to learn about the development of their own and other children, and to have access to the professional expertise of teachers.

It was clear from the information obtained that parents/parent committees had a major role in ensuring that the ongoing service provided by mobile pre-school units was as smooth and efficient as possible. Their major contributions were in the areas of fundraising, the cleaning and maintenance of venues, provision of outdoor equipment/play areas, keeping venues safe and, during sessions, providing back up to teachers by means of the parent help system (whereby one or two parents were rostered for duty at each session to help unpack equipment from the van, set up the session, prepare morning/afternoon tea, and to carry out any other tasks required by the teachers). There was less evidence of parents becoming involved in the programme by working with the children (not counting general supervision and caregiving of children) although this occurred to some extent.

Data in this chapter (see also Chapter 3) again showed that few parent groups - for a variety of reasons - ran their own sessions on days when the mobile unit did not visit their area, despite the dissatisfaction that was expressed about the infrequency of visits by the mobile unit. (Rather than run their own sessions, around 25% of the parents who responded said that from time to time - often at considerable inconvenience to themselves in terms of distance to travel, time and cost - they took their child to an alternative pre-school facility on days when mobile unit sessions were not being held.)

To conclude, this chapter has shown that although a sizeable proportion of parents wished that mobile pre-school units could spend more time in their particular communities each week (others acknowledged that while, **in theory**, they would also have liked this, they would be unlikely to be able to take advantage of an increased service due to distance to travel and/or other commitments), respondents were generally very happy with their children's (not to mention their own) mobile pre-school unit experience. This showed in the very positive ratings given in the parent questionnaire (eg about the learning experiences provided for children, children's happiness at sessions, and so on) and the finding that positive comments about mobile units considerably outnumbered negative comments (see, for example, Tables 5.14 and 5.15).

CHAPTER SIX: MOBILE PRE-SCHOOL UNITS FROM AN 'ADMINISTRATIVE PERSPECTIVE'

Introduction

In order to obtain information on mobile pre-schools additional to that provided by teachers and parents, questionnaires were developed and distributed to the individuals and organisations with some responsibility for overseeing the mobile pre-school units (ie the mobile units' management committees; each unit's local kindergarten association - plus the Auckland YWCA in the case of the YWCA unit; senior teachers; and the District Officers - Early Childhood Education).

The purpose of the questionnaire (the content of questionnaires sent to each group was identical) therefore, was to obtain an 'administrative perspective' on the mobile units to complement the perspectives of the practitioner (teachers) and the consumer (parents). Items in the questionnaire requested recipients to comment, for example, on how they saw the role or function of the mobile pre-school unit in their area in respect to children, parents and the community; the involvement that they or their organisation had in the overall running of the mobile unit, the strengths and weaknesses of mobile units as they saw them; and, changes, if any, they would like to see made.

Response Rates

Of the nine management committee questionnaires distributed, six (66.7%) were returned. (The committees from the YWCA, Lakeland, and Marlborough units omitted to return questionnaires.) There were also six questionnaires returned by kindergarten associations (in respect of all but the YWCA, Southland and Marlborough units), five (55.7%) from district officers (associated with the Southland, Waimate, Hunterville, Thames and YWCA units), and seven (77.8%) questionnaires from senior teachers (ie for all but the YWCA and Hunterville units).

Because of the small numbers of respondents representing each group (especially given that the different characteristics and conditions involved for each mobile unit means that it is difficult to make useful comparisons between respondents' answers, other than certain major 'themes' evident in answers across all groups) only an outline of the sorts of responses made are included in this report[39]. (One or two respondents from each group - excepting the management committees - also indicated that due to circumstances such as recently being appointed to their position, or not being able to be in regular, close contact with the mobile unit in their area, they were not fully familiar with all aspects of the unit they were being asked to comment on.)

The Management Committees

Mobile pre-school units' management committees were made up of elected representatives from each of the groups served by the individual units.

Management committees indicated that they had close and regular contact with teachers at committee meetings (held every 4 to 8 weeks at the various units), at sessions, and by telephone. Responding committees variously stated that the major purpose of their contact with teachers was "... to support the teachers in their professional capacity and to support them personally..."; "...for the smooth running of the unit"; "...to oversee finance"; and, "...to discuss what the teachers require eg cash, materials. Also [to] discuss what trips are coming up, numbers of children on waiting lists, numbers attending, and the general programme."

In relation to the question 'what involvement does your committee have in the running and organisation of the mobile pre-school unit's programme?' responses suggested considerable variation in the role of committees from different units, for example:

> ***"We see the staff as the trained, professional people who set up and run the programme. We contribute local knowledge, collect and contribute some materials, help with transport for trips. We raise funds and organise parents' social events. We make some suggestions for equipment and make every effort to look after our staff."***
>
> ***"We have full involvement in the running of the unit along with the teachers."***
>
> ***"Buying of equipment. Checking that everything is safe eg heaters, fences."***
>
> ***"None - we oversee the money side only."***

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[39] If desired, a fuller analysis of results and/or a copy of the questionnaire which was used may be obtained on request from the first author, Research and Statistics Division of the Ministry of Education.

> ***"Mother helps are very important in the smooth running of the kindergarten. The committee organises all these duties and is in close liaison with the teachers."***

> ***"None really in the curriculum, although with our major fundraising event (a cabaret) the children were involved with the art work. We organise mother helps (two people) to help set up the hall at each session, assist during the session, then clean up later."***

When management committees were asked to give their views on mobile pre-school units it was apparent from the sorts of responses made, that the attitudes which predominated echoed those evident from teachers' and parents' responses, already discussed at length in earlier chapters. For example, when asked to comment on strengths of mobile pre-school units, respondents referred to the fact that a service was available for children (and parents) who would not otherwise have access to a pre-school education facility, that there were "wonderful teachers", and that there was a positive working relationship between teachers, parents and the community, which contributed to the success of the mobile units.

As for other groups of respondents, management committees again mentioned, as a major weakness of mobile units, the lack of time spent with each group. Some committees also mentioned problems of inadequate facilities to meet in, the difficulty of communicating effectively with several parent groups, especially when the various communities in which they were located were geographically distant, and also the difficulties, at times, of trying to contact staff who were so often on the road travelling between sessions and therefore unable to be reached by telephone.

Changes to mobile units that the responding committees would liked to have seen, included:

> ***"More time/opportunity for mobile teachers to meet other mobile teachers - as an additional resource."***

> ***"We would like more sessions per week."***

> ***"Clarification of rules - rules from the department seem to be unclear at times."***

> ***"'Science' to be taught with the programme, and an opportunity to have contact with other mobile units."***

All six committees were satisfied with the amount of involvement they had in the running and organisation of their mobile unit except perhaps in the area of helping to decide upon changes in itinerary: some committees felt that such decisions should be less the concern of bodies such as kindergarten associations and the Department of Education and more the responsibility of management committees, in consultation with each of the parent groups and the teachers.

To conclude, it is apparent that despite recognition of certain limitations of mobile pre-school units, management committees were, like parents and teachers, generally very satisfied with the service provided. Two committees commented:

> ***"In our area, for the benefit of the rural children, the mobile kindergartens are essential. With the rural down-turn, families are under more pressure and would not be able to provide any other pre-school education."***

> ***"We really appreciate having another person (teacher) persevere with our own children in some areas eg using scissors."***

Kindergarten Associations

The kindergarten associations which responded indicated that while they had little involvement in the 'running and organisation of the mobile unit's programme' they were generally involved to a considerable extent in decisions about the places that the mobile units visited. One respondent commented, for example:

> ***"The association decides on the areas visited, the major reason being to service the most children possible. The areas aren't changed unless the numbers are very low. This decision is made with the approval of the Department of Education."***

Representatives of the kindergarten associations again highlighted the value of having the services of mobile units in areas which would not otherwise have access to pre-school education, but also regretted the lack of time the units were able to devote to many of their groups. More parent education was also thought to be a need in some areas.

The following quotations sum up well the general views expressed by this group of respondents:

> ***"We feel our unit runs very well and hope other units have as much benefit to the children and communities."***

> ***"The mobile unit provides a valuable pre-school service in areas where parents and children would otherwise have to travel considerable distances to attend standard kindergartens."***

Senior Teachers and District Officers - Early Childhood Education

The role of the senior teachers and the District Officers - Early Childhood Education in respect of mobile pre-school unit teachers seemed to be very similar ie both parties felt that they **primarily** offered professional advice and support to teachers in connection with the programme that they ran. They made suggestions about activities and equipment to use, gave advice on interacting with parents and, in the case of the district officers in particular, advised on health and safety matters in connection with venues, and contributed to decisions about closing and opening groups in different communities. There was considerable variation in the amount of involvement that respondents said they were able to have with their mobile units - from the respondent who said that she regularly travelled on the van with the teachers in order to attend sessions, to the one who said that she had, so far, had almost no contact with the mobile unit in her area.

Both senior teachers and district officers expressed a range of quite individual opinions about the strengths and weaknesses of mobile units and about changes that they felt should be made but the main themes (ie both positive and negative) are well summed up in a comment from one district officer. She commented:

> ***"Mobile units do fulfil an important need in rural communities. Visits, however, are only once a week which is insufficient to provide a comprehensive programme for children. Parents need to be encouraged and helped to run their own sessions."***

Finally, one last quotation (from a senior teacher) illustrates the largely very positive views held by these groups of respondents:

> ***"My two visits [to the unit] this term have confirmed for me the belief that this type of service has very positive outcomes, especially for parents, though the focus is on children's social and play needs...I warmly support the initiatives of the Association and Department in providing an opportunity for this diversification of the kindergarten service. I commend the present head teacher on her work. It is professional and appropriate."***

Summary

As evident from the brief outline of views held by the 'administrators' connected with mobile pre-school units, the themes which have continually surfaced in previous chapters of this report (eg the value of the mobile pre-school unit service for communities which would otherwise not have access to pre-school education; and the need for groups to receive more visits from the units) have again predominated. Respondents, in general, also indicated that they felt there was a definite ongoing need for the services of mobile pre-school units in isolated (rural) areas and that other parts of the country than those presently served (one mentioned the need in urban centres where children are required to be on long waiting lists) could benefit from a similar service.

The themes which have predominated throughout the previous chapters are brought together for a final analysis in the overall summary and discussion (Chapter 7) which follows.

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CHAPTER SEVEN: SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Volume I of the report on mobile pre-school units in New Zealand has presented data on the units from a number of different perspectives. Chapter 3, for example, provides a discussion of what it was like, from the teachers' point of view, to work as a mobile pre-school unit teacher. The chapter also presents, together with other topics, teachers' stated philosophies for working with children and with parents.

Chapter 4 provides the results of observations which were carried out during the fieldwork period at each unit. The observations were designed to obtain systematic, objective data on the sorts of interactions that occur between teachers and children, and teachers and parents during the course of ordinary sessions. The main findings from, and implications of, the observation data are raised in later sections of this chapter.

Chapter 5 presents data from the questionnaires which were completed by parents, and parent committees, associated with each mobile pre-school unit. Parents, and parent committees, were asked to comment on aspects of their particular mobile unit (eg whether they felt that 'good' learning environments were provided for children; whether their children were happy at sessions; whether they, as parents, gained from their association with the mobile unit; what the strengths and weaknesses of mobile pre-school units were; and, the nature and extent of their involvement in the running and organisation of their unit).

Chapter 6 gives an outline of views on mobile pre-school units held by management committees, the local kindergarten associations, the YWCA, senior teachers, and the District Officers - Early Childhood Education.

Volume II of this report contains individual case studies on each of the nine mobile pre-school units in New Zealand. The purpose of the case studies was to give an insight into the particular characteristics of each mobile unit (including the similarities and differences when compared to other units) and into the day to day running of the units.

The Consumer Perspective: Parents' Views about Mobile Pre-School Units

As shown in Chapter 5 - and in the individual case studies - parents, in general, commented very favourably about mobile pre-school units. To some extent, it could be argued that the very positive opinions expressed may have been the result of an overriding gratitude (especially from those living in more isolated areas who would have found it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to make alternative arrangements for their children - at least, in terms of their children being able to interact with their peers) that **any** pre-school facility was available in their community and that, for this reason, it is unlikely that consumers of a service such as provided by mobile pre-school units would be very critical. In addition, it could be said that not all parents necessarily had the knowledge required to be able to effectively assess whether the mobile pre-school units were providing effective learning environments for their children. However, that being said, it was very clear from the wealth of comments made in the questionnaires (and from comments made directly to the researchers during the fieldwork periods) that parents were overwhelmingly in favour of the mobile pre-school unit service.

The Amount of Time that Mobile Units were Able to Spend with the Groups that they Served

Despite the mostly very favourable comments made about the mobile units, there was one major area of criticism or concern that occurred in responses from parents connected with all nine mobile units. This was that parents (around one-third overall) wanted **more** visits from their mobile unit each week (parents associated with groups which received two or three weekly visits from the mobile unit were just as likely to express this opinion as parents from groups visited only once a week), especially as session times were relatively short (2-3 hours in most cases). Many of those who made this criticism made it clear that they felt it was an example of country people, by comparison with town or city dwellers, being disadvantaged. (Teachers, and individuals from other groups which took part in the study, expressed similar views.)

The Extent to Which Parent Groups Ran Additional Sessions Themselves

One of the aims of the study was to gather information on the extent to which parents ran their own sessions on the days that the mobile unit did not visit their particular group. The evidence was that this occurred only very seldom (the main exception being groups associated with the YWCA unit in Auckland where parents regularly ran their own sessions[40]). That parents so rarely ran additional sessions raises some interesting points, especially in view of the desire expressed by so many parents that their children have more time at pre-school each week.

Some of the reasons given by **parent groups** (committees) for not running additional sessions were that it would be too expensive to hire their local hall for extra meetings, that they would not have sufficient equipment when this was not supplemented by the contents of the mobile unit's van, that parents had too far to travel or were too committed in other areas of their lives to spare time to run or attend a session, or that parents in the area either were not interested in running additional sessions themselves or had not expressed any wish/need for them.

Teachers, too, commented in the interviews that they felt that, at some groups, there was not a great deal of interest amongst the parents in running their own sessions, while at others they felt that the practicalities (ie the problems of a place to meet, acquiring a suitable and sufficient supply of equipment, and people having to travel long distances to attend) overrode any desire that parents may have had to run their own sessions. It was also evident that, in most instances, the question of parents running additional sessions themselves had not been a topic for discussion between parents and teachers, at least not in any concentrated way (suggesting that at least some of the teachers did not place a high priority on these and/or that they did not regard encouraging parents to run their own sessions as part of their role). In addition, although teachers stated that they would have been happy to offer advice and to lend some equipment for interested parents to use, they felt they were already too committed to have any more substantial input into any such endeavours.

The early concept of mobile pre-school units (as stated in the 'Hill Report', 1971 and in the 1981 guidelines for mobile pre-school units - referred to in Chapter 1) included the idea that teachers would help and encourage any parent groups, which had expressed an interest in doing so, to run their own sessions as a way of improving the opportunities for children in more isolated areas to receive pre-school education. Although the difficulties, such as existing work commitments and the practical obstacles referred to above, expressed by teachers and parents in setting up and running additional sessions must be acknowledged, it seems likely that these do not fully explain why parents so seldom ran additional sessions. It may be that parents, for a variety of reasons, relied rather heavily upon the presence of teachers (ie as

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[40] The YWCA unit was notably different from the other units in many ways. One of the major ways was its philosophy of 'empowering women', a philosophy which included providing parents with the skills and confidence to take responsibility for their own groups - while continuing to receive back up from teachers.

'trained professionals'). Some of these reasons, deduced from comments made in the various questionnaires used for this study, may be that parents felt that: they did not have the necessary skills to run a programme themselves; the 'quality' of the pre-school education provided would not be as good; they would encounter problems of who would 'lead' the group if the teachers were not present; children would be more difficult to manage without the 'authority' and abilities of the teachers (also, that it was preferable for children and parents alike to sometimes be away from one another); and, that it was more difficult for them as parents to be as motivated or 'directed' without the teachers. (Some support for the idea that parents were happiest when there were teachers or other trained or experienced early childhood staff at hand comes from the data which showed that a significant proportion of parents (25% overall) took steps - often at considerable inconvenience to themselves - to ensure that their children attended some **other** type of formal pre-school education facility when mobile pre-school unit visits were not scheduled (even though they were aware that this was 'officially' not allowed).

Strategies for Improving the Amount of Pre-School Education Received by Mobile Pre-School Unit Children

It would seem that if mobile pre-school units are to meet the early notion of helping parents to supplement the programme offered by the units (and the idea of parents as educators is very much to the fore in the present educational climate, thereby reinforcing the original concept), then consideration should be given to how parents can be encouraged and/or enabled to run additional sessions and/or home education programmes.

A possible way of accomplishing this could perhaps include providing mobile unit teachers with more back up and support (ie in situations where it is impossible to reduce the numbers of groups a particular unit has to visit each week) to free them, on occasions, from normal duties and enable them to meet with parents interested in beginning their own groups and/or who wish to develop more confidence, skills and knowledge in, for example, child development and parenting. (Teachers stated that, in their existing work situation, it was not at all easy to organise such get-togethers.) In addition, steps could be perhaps be taken to promote liaison between mobile pre-school unit teachers and itinerant pre-school/ REAP workers, health professionals, and so on, in order to assist communities to run their own groups. Packman (1985), in his study of rural services in New Zealand gives support to this idea. He advocated that increased or improved liaison between early childhood and other community workers could considerably improve early childhood provisions in rural communities. (There was not a great deal of evidence from this study to indicate that teachers liaised to any great extent with other early childhood education workers in their general area: often this was because of geographical distance, but also because with travelling to and from groups there was little time in the course of a working week to do so.)

Packman stated:

> ***"For rural areas the mobile component (ie itinerant teachers, community pre-school workers and mobile units) has the potential to fill many of the gaps in provision but it may be advantageous to put them on the same financial/organisational basis to encourage them to work together. There would seem to be the scope for this mobile sector to develop links with other services eg Health, Education, Social Welfare, Libraries, Citizens Advice Bureau, in much the same way that the playbuses (converted double-decker-buses which provide both the venue and equipment for early childhood education and other activities) have in the United Kingdom...and provide a wide variety of services to rural mothers and their children." (pp.64-65)***

Following the publication of his report, John Packman was invited to a national residential course on 'Early Childhood Education in Rural Areas' (Lopdell Centre, Auckland, March 1985) to comment on some of his major findings in relation to mobile pre-school services. In his study, he had been particularly interested in the extent to which, rather than country parents and children travelling into town for services, these were taken out to the people. This, therefore, had been a focus of his visit to the Marlborough mobile pre-school unit (referred to in Chapter 1 of this report) and of his investigation of the respective roles of itinerant and community pre-school workers. He concluded that:

> ***"...those three elements were all mobile pre-school resources but instead of them all being used together to provide a service co-ordinated by someone or other they all seemed to be doing their own thing in a not haphazard way, but in an unplanned way." (p.7 Part II of the course report, Department of Education files)***

As Packman (1985) suggested, therefore, perhaps if mobile unit teachers were able to collaborate more with itinerant pre-school teachers (in areas where these exist) and other relevant education and community workers, together, they would be more able to extend the pre-school service provided in rural districts, including enabling parents to run additional sessions themselves if desired or needed.

It is important to keep in mind, however, in any discussion about parent-run sessions, that parents should have the final say in whether or not they want to run additional sessions: the issue of equity for women includes, in part, that there be quality early childhood education and/or care readily available for their children, and that women have the right to have time out from their children from time to time. Any attempts, therefore, to have parents run their own sessions should, it is suggested, be done within a framework of **choice** by parents and not as an alternative to quality government sponsored and run pre-school facilities.

The Quality of the Service Provided by Mobile Pre-School Units

Although groups attached to mobile pre-school units were seldom able to receive a pre-school education programme in much **quantity**, data presented throughout the report (but particularly in Chapter 4) suggest that the **quality** of the programme, ie in terms of the nature and extent of interactions between teachers and children (and teachers and parents) during sessions was frequently very high.

There is increasing evidence (eg Smith and McMillan, 1986) that high child-staff ratios make it difficult for teachers to interact on more than a superficial level with the majority of children attending a session, and that low child-staff ratios - a salient feature of the majority of the groups visited by mobile pre-school units - have a correspondingly favourable outcome for interactions between children and teachers (and for interactions between children as well.) The mobile pre-school unit teachers claimed - and this was supported by data presented in Chapter 4 - that they were able to spend much of their time during sessions interacting on a one-to-one basis with individual children and to facilitating play with small groups. This allowed ample scope to encourage the development of quality language (identified by the teachers as a special need of some of the more isolated rural children) and to bring about interactions between children not used to working or playing together.

Another often cited advantage of the mobile pre-school units was that, despite infrequency of visits, the units permitted children to (officially) enter the programme at a much younger age $2^1/_2$ to 3 years) than was customary at 'conventional' kindergartens. (However, there were also some parents who felt that older children - four up to five year olds - could sometimes miss out as a result of this early entry policy. Because the teachers had to try and cater for a wide range of children in terms of age and abilities, and were, as well, limited by what they could carry in the van, these parents - and some teachers and other respondents as well - felt there were not always sufficiently challenging or stimulating activities and equipment available for the older children.)

Within the limitations necessarily imposed by the itinerant nature of the units, in general (according to respondent groups and to the observation data which was obtained) the units seemed to provide the major elements of a 'quality' early childhood programme ie they fulfilled, for example, the features cited by Tennant, McNaughton and Glynn (1988) as "crucial for young children learning to communicate." The features of an early childhood setting described by Tennant et al as necessary "to provide a socially responsive context for language learning were:

> ***"...a variety of play materials and elective activities; adults who give responsive feedback in their interactions with children, and child-caregiver ratios and programmes which can provide for the time many child initiated interactions require." (p.50)***

McDonnell and Hardman (1988, p.329) in their article 'A Synthesis of 'Best Practice' Guidelines for Early Childhood Services' stated that programmes should, amongst other things: include "support for [the] parenting role", be "adaptable" (eg involve "flexible procedures" and "support of different family structures") and "peer and family referenced" (eg have a "curriculum that is referenced to [the] individual child, family, peers, and [the] community", and promote "systematic communication between family and service providers"). McDonnell and Hardman's emphasis on adaptability and the family, while applicable to all early childhood education and care services, seems especially relevant to mobile pre-school units. Appropriately, therefore, data from the present study indicate that the mobile units were frequently attempting to meet such criteria (although there was other evidence to suggest that having "parents as full partners in educational planning and decision making" and "planned enhancement of [each] child's skill development within [the] daily family routine" - also cited by McDonnell and Hardman as highly desirable aspects of a quality service - were goals achieved at a considerably lower level, the latter due largely to time constraints and the former, probably because the ideology - of both teachers and parents - prevalent at the time of the study was not geared to that way of thinking or working).

Isenberg and Quisenberry (1988) wrote of the vital role that 'play' has in children's (social, psychosocial, physical and cognitive) development and stressed that in a world "characterised by pressure to succeed in all areas" that "...children's right to play...must be defended by all adults, especially parents and educators. The time has come to advocate strongly in support of play for all children." (p.138) It was evident that mobile unit teachers made every attempt to safeguard children's right to play (sometimes in the face of opposition from parents) in the programmes that they provided and, although it was not always as straightforward a matter as it would be in a 'standard' kindergarten, to make available as wide a range of appropriate play activities and equipment as they could. Most mobile unit groups (as a joint effort between teachers and parents), even those meeting in shared accommodation, also managed to provide the "appropriate, planned outdoor play environments" urged by Isenberg and Quisenberry, although, not unexpectedly, these varied considerably in scope at different venues, depending on space available and other considerations.

This study was primarily designed to describe rather than to **evaluate** per se the programmes provided by mobile pre-school units and, in any case, the question of a 'quality' programme continues to be a vexed one, and dependent upon the needs and desires of particular groups or communities. However, if parents' assessment of how happy their children were at sessions is any guide then the data showed that the mobile units were running successful programmes (see Chapter 5).

Finally, on the question of the 'quality' or otherwise of early childhood education programmes, Farquhar (1989) indicated that a more indepth knowledge of what **does** occur in present early childhood institutions will help to improve future decisions about any changes that should be made. She stated:

> ***"Research can play an important role in strengthening the knowledge base of the early childhood field and in providing information and examining strategies that will ultimately lead to improvements in practice."***

She went on to state that:

> ***"Currently we lack a clear understanding of the value systems within the New Zealand context which underline quality early childhood practice. An understanding of the meaning of quality in relation to the variety of curricula beliefs held by the different early childhood movements is necessary before knowledge can be translated into practice in order to deliver high quality services." (p.18)***

It is hoped that information from the present study will go some way to meeting the need that Farquhar has identified for increased knowledge about the reality of early childhood education in practice. Farquhar's words also seem especially appropriate in the present context given the desirability, in terms of extending the service (ie the **quantity**) provided by mobile pre-school units, of liaising with other early childhood/community workers and the evidence which suggests that mobile pre-school units, while classified (except in the case of the YWCA unit) as free kindergartens, may in some ways be more similar to other types of early childhood education institutions - for example, playcentres.

Mobile Pre-School Units and Parents

Parental Involvement

In the Department of Education's 1981 paper 'Some Guidelines for Establishing and Operating a Mobile Pre-School Unit', it was stated:

> ***"The successful operation of a mobile unit, as with any other aspect of pre-school education, will be dependent on the goodwill of those involved and a great deal of co-operative endeavour." (p.5)***

There was plenty of evidence to show that the help and support provided for teachers by parents was a vital, and integral, part of the running and organisation of the mobile pre-school units without which the delivery of the service would be seriously disrupted given the time constraints (in terms of travelling between venues, unpacking and repacking the van and so on) that the mobile units must work under.

There was not as much evidence, however, to suggest that parents in general spent a great deal of time working directly with the children - although their presence and help with general supervision and caregiving of children facilitated **teachers** being able to do so. Perhaps if parents were to work more with the children this would better help them to acquire valuable skills in relating to children - although both parents and teachers felt that, at least to some extent, parents were able to learn such skills from observing teachers in action. Also, as pointed out by the teachers, it was often just as valuable, if not more so, from the parents' point of view, to have the opportunity for some time out for themselves during sessions (including being able to interact with other adults) and **not** have to devote session times to working with children.

Parents' Needs

Earlier discussion in this chapter has focused on the possibility of encouraging parent groups to run additional sessions - for the benefit of the children - on days when the mobile pre-school unit cannot visit. But the needs of children should, as has been suggested before, be balanced with the needs of parents (particularly women).

In Education to be More, the Report of the Early Childhood Care and Education Working Group (1988) it is stated that:

> ***"The recommendations in this report form the foundation of a system which will provide, for a greater range of women, a wider range of choices about how they will use their time. The benefits to women - both psychological and economic - will be particularly significant for women with low incomes or with no income of their own. These women will have more opportunity to begin to address their own needs, while the needs of their children are also being met. For too long, too many women have had no option but to provide the bulk of their children's early childhood care and education themselves, or to spend a large proportion of their wages in purchasing these services." (p.74)***

Further, in 'Tomorrow's Schools: The Reform of Education Administration in New Zealand (1988) it was stated that one of the five main focus areas for the (new) Early Childhood Development Unit was that of "family support" - ie taking into account the needs of parents as well as children. In addition, Smith (1988) reiterated "how important preschools are for the well-being of families, a goal which has been under emphasised to some extent in New Zealand". She goes on to refer to research which has indicated that:

> ***"...one of the most beneficial roles of nursery education...was to relieve mothers of the constant care of young children which many find to be extremely stressful, especially in cases of loneliness, isolation or poverty...[and to research which refers to this as]...the 'shared rearing' role of pre-school education which is concerned with making families function in a more effective and enjoyable manner...[although, as has been pointed out]...this role is much less accepted than the 'academic' role of preparing children for school or compensating for disadvantage, yet it is equally or more important." (p.229-230)***

The present report has shown that a significant number of parents (82%) felt that they benefited on a personal level from their association with a mobile pre-school unit - because of the opportunity to have social contact with other parents (and with the teachers), to have time out from their children, to learn more about their own and other children, and to share problems or concerns about their children (and sometimes other matters) with professionally trained staff. Information contained in this report has also indicated that loss of the mobile unit service would disadvantage parents as much as it would their children. Given the evidence of the data (both from this study and from previous research such as that cited by Smith above), therefore, it is clearly important to keep in mind the more personal needs of parents when considering the desirability or otherwise of having parents become more actively involved in sessions by working with children, running additional sessions, and so on, especially when they already have considerable input in other ways into the overall service provided by mobile pre-school units.

Training of Teachers

In the Report of the Working Party on Field-Based Training for Early childhood Education (July 1988)[41] it was stated under the heading 'Issues of Particular Significance' for early childhood training that:

> ***"Communities have a wide range of cultural and ethnic backgrounds and if this diversity is to be supported and respected, then the services offered must take account of the needs and preferences that exist within such groups." (p.5)***

This is an issue of considerable importance for mobile pre-school unit teachers who may have to adjust to the needs of up to eight, often quite different, groups in the course of their working week.

As parents frequently have a high profile at mobile units (eg because many stay throughout sessions, and also because they do a lot of work to ensure that venues reach the minimum health and safety standards set for kindergartens, etc) mobile pre-school teachers must also be as adept at working and communicating with parents as they are with the children.

Smith and Hubbard (1987) in their study 'Bridging the Gap Between Parent and Professional' found that "personality hassles and differences" were frequently mentioned as problems in parent/staff relationships in early childhood centres. They felt that this suggested a need for early childhood staff (and, as stated above, there seemed to be a particularly high level of need for this in the mobile unit context) to have:

> ***"...particular training in human relationships to help them relate to so many parents with different characteristics, problems and strengths and to learn skills of listening and sensitivity. The notion that professionalism will distance the staff member from the parent is, in our view, a false one. The truly professional staff member does not distance herself from parents or take the position of an expert who "owns" the early childhood centre territory. She understands the importance of being in touch with parents and is open to their concerns because she perceives that this will help her work***

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[41] The working party on field-based training was set up at the request of the Director of the former Department of Education's Early Childhood Education Division.

> ***effectively with the child. It is clear that some staff members were very skilful in such work with parents. In our view such skills need to be given more prominence than they have in the past in the selection and training of early childhood staff." (p.20)***

Teachers' ability to relate well to parents also has implications for how effectively the skills involved in relating and working well with children are passed on to parents (especially important in the relatively isolated communities served by mobile units where parents have limited scope to meet and talk with 'professional' people). Bronfenbrenner (1979) stated that positive relations between parents and staff are a way of bringing together "the child's 'significant others' - the parent and the teacher - as *partners*, not competitors or strangers, in the child's learning process. Neither can do this job in opposition to the other or in isolation." (p.227) Lilian Katz[42] also suggested that "parent education" is often most effective - especially for less confident parents - when done as unobtrusively and naturally as possible - for example, in regular and open exchanges between parents and teachers who get on well rather than in structured, and therefore artificial (and perhaps rather threatening), situations.

The recently introduced (1989) three year training programme for early childhood education/care workers (whereby students receive training in relation to children of less than one year up to and including school children in junior classes) seems to have particular relevance for the work of mobile pre-school unit teachers. At many groups served by the mobile pre-schools there were often a large number of toddlers or other very young children present (in many instances, the age at which children attending mobile unit sessions could be 'officially' enrolled was as low as $2^1/_2$ to 3 years) who, although generally supervised by their parents - whose particular responsibility this was - nevertheless had a significant effect on the type of programme that was run. Teachers varied in their attitudes to the presence of relatively large numbers of very young children: some very much enjoyed their presence, while others - especially the most recent graduates - sometimes found it difficult (at least initially) to adjust to the needs of these children. They found it hard to judge just from looking at a child how old she/he was and not infrequently found they were expecting too much, or not enough, of a particular child. (The teachers reported that this was not a problem encountered to the same extent in 'standard' kindergartens where the age range of children at morning/afternoon sessions was much more uniform.)

Other disadvantages of having very young children present were cited to be that the work was less challenging when the overall age of the group was very young and that they felt more like babysitters than teachers, that little children disrupted the activities made available for older children and contributed significantly to noise levels and to feelings of being cramped at small venues, and that older children missed out by not having more challenging activities (catering for a wide age range within the same group, sometimes resulted in the overall difficulty level being pitched to the middle age-range). Some teachers simply remarked that they felt they had not been trained to teach children under three years of age and that this aspect of their work on the mobile units was sometimes difficult and frustrating, although most also indicated that once they had had a chance to adjust they learned to value their contact with such children. In the future, however, if teachers receive training directed at the wider age range, their adjustment to working on a mobile pre-school unit may be made significantly easier.

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[42] See footnote 6, Chapter 1.

The 1981 Department of Education 'Guidelines for Establishing and Operating a Mobile Pre-School Unit' stated:

> ***"Induction of the teachers to the unit will be the responsibility of the education officer (early childhood education) and the controlling body." (Department of Education files)***

There was little evidence, however, that this happened in practice. Teachers reported that they had had to learn 'on-the-job', with only the help of the other teacher with whom they worked. This was an aspect of mobile pre-school units which teachers felt was in urgent need of change, both for the sake of future teachers, and also to ensure the efficient running of the mobile units (eg by helping to improve the retention rates of teachers).

Finally, with regard to training considerations, teachers repeatedly mentioned (as did senior teachers and others) that they felt that, once in a position as a mobile pre-school unit teacher, valuable ongoing 'training' would be to have regular get-togethers with other mobile unit teachers in order to exchange ideas and to share problems and successes.

Reiteration of (Some) Major Findings/Points from the Study

- Mobile pre-school units had an impact on a large number of families: official figures for 1988 showed that more than 850 children over the age of $2^1/_2$ years attended the nine units throughout New Zealand. (There were also considerably more children under that age who attended sessions on a regular basis.)

- Evidence suggests (eg Allan and Critchlow, 1989, and data from this report) that there is a continuing demand/need for (more) early childhood education services in rural (and some urban) areas and that there are still significant sectors in New Zealand which are disadvantaged in terms of full access to pre-school education.

- While mobile pre-school units (classified, with the exception of the YWCA unit as free kindergartens) have many similarities to 'conventional' kindergartens, there are a number of important differences. Apart from the obvious one of the units being mobile in nature, such differences include having a wide age range of children within the same groups and having a large number of parents remain throughout sessions. These (and other aspects of mobile unit groups) often markedly affect the teachers' work and the nature of the programmes they are able to run. The differences between mobile pre-school units and other kindergartens suggest that, in some ways, it may be inappropriate to continue to classify them as 'kindergartens' and to impose all of the same rules and regulations. Consideration should perhaps be given to drawing up specific guidelines for mobile pre-school units. (This seems particularly essential in the case of the YWCA unit which is clearly very different not only from 'conventional' kindergartens but from other mobile units as well, given its concentration on parents (women) first and children second, and the high level of community involvement required of the teachers.) The current emphasis on the development of charters for individual educational institutions, which came about with the changeover from the Department to the Ministry of Education, may help ensure that the specific needs of mobile pre-school units are better recognised.

- Teachers, parents, and others felt that, in general, mobile units were able to provide 'good' learning experiences. (These perceptions were backed up by other data presented in this report, eg Chapter 4.) This was particularly evident, due to the amount of time teachers were able to spend interacting with individual children and small groups, in the areas of social development and language acquisition. There was perhaps less evidence of an optimum learning environment for some of the higher level cognitive skill areas (especially for children approaching school age) largely as a result of the infrequency of visits, and teachers not being able to extend and/or follow through on programmes; the limitations on equipment that could be carried in the van and on what was therefore available at any given session; and, lack of time due to the itinerant nature of the unit.

- The major dissatisfaction (expressed by all groups of respondents) with the mobile units was that they were not able to visit individual groups often enough - this led to the feeling that rural children continued to be disadvantaged compared to their counterparts in towns and cities. Possible solutions to this problem would be to have: more mobile units; parents running additional sessions themselves; increased liaison between early childhood and other community workers in order to develop ways of supplementing the service provided by the units; or, a combination of the previous three suggested strategies.

- The problem of the mobile units' lack of ability to spend more time with each of the groups that they serviced was offset to a significant extent by the small size of groups which, together with parental assistance, allowed teachers to spend a large proportion of their time interacting with small groups or with children on a one-to-one basis. There is evidence to suggest that this seldom occurs in early childhood education institutions which customarily have much larger roll numbers and considerably less favourable adult to child ratios.

- Few parent groups ran sessions on the days that mobile units did not visit their communities. This suggests a possible area for change (bearing in mind, however, that issues of equity in respect of women dictate that over-burdening parents must be avoided) in the purpose and organisation of the mobile pre-school units, if the problem of continuing discrepancies between the provision of pre-school education in isolated areas and other parts of New Zealand is to be minimised.

- Although teachers acted as role models for parents and were available before, during and after sessions (and to a more limited extent, at other times as well) to answer parents' queries, there was little evidence that there was a great deal of provision, in the more formal sense, for parent education.

- There was a wealth of data from the study to suggest that many parents gained as much, if not more, than their children from their association with a mobile pre-school unit. (Data showed, too, that teachers were often able to devote considerable time to parents during sessions, again something that occurs much less frequently in early childhood institutions with larger roll numbers and fewer adults present to help run the programme.)

- Overall, although teachers who took part in this study were very positive about their positions as mobile pre-school unit teachers, they indicated that potential appointees needed to have special skills and qualities (eg flexibility; the ability to interact with a wide range of parents as well as children; and the ability to tolerate the frustrations of limited availability of equipment at given sessions, limited time and variable conditions in which to run sessions) to equip them for the job. They also felt that it was important for potential appointees to "know what they are in for" before accepting a position as a mobile pre-school unit teacher. (There is evidence of a high turn-over of staff on mobile units, sometimes due to people not wanting to live, in the longer term, in some of the areas in which mobile units are based (specifically, Hunterville) but, at other times, because the demands of the work were too great, or not what they had expected.

- Mobile unit teachers, although able to have (varying degrees of) contact with other early childhood education workers, and with their professional network of advisers (senior teachers, district officers, kindergarten associations, YWCA) still continued to feel professionally isolated in many ways. They felt that the solution to this problem (and one which would perhaps help reduce staff turnover figures) would be, in large part, to have regular (eg once or twice a year) conferences or gatherings of mobile unit teachers to enable a sharing of what they considered was the rather rarefied experience of being a mobile pre-school unit teacher.

- There was information obtained[43] which suggested that teachers would have liked clarification of a) the rules and regulations for mobile pre-school units and b) the respective roles of their local kindergarten association, the YWCA (in the case of the YWCA unit), and the Department (now Ministry) of Education, in order to clarify their own role and to facilitate not only administrative matters but also the running and organisation of their unit as a whole.

- Finally, the findings of this study clearly indicate that the service provided by mobile pre-school units was highly valued by the communities which received it and, although certain changes/modifications were desired, the perception of respondents was that withdrawal of the service would be to the detriment not only of the children and parents but to the community as a whole, especially in some of the rural areas, which as more than a few parents and teachers put it, "have already lost so much."

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[43] From notes - supplied by the KTA, Wellington - of a two day seminar held by the KTA for mobile unit teachers in November 1989, it was apparent that this was an ongoing problem for mobile unit staff members.

Use of the Report

It is hoped that this report (Vols. I and II) will have provided a sufficient insight into the advantages and disadvantages of mobile pre-school units to enable sound, balanced decisions about their future shape to be made.

It is also hoped that the report may prove useful and illuminating to present and future mobile pre-school units teachers and to others working in the early childhood (education) field.

APPENDIX ONE: MEMBERS OF THE ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Committee Member	Organisation/position held at the time the advisory committee meeting, November 1987
Megan Cochrane	Representative for the YWCA mobile pre-school unit, West Auckland
Judy Courtney	Representative for the New Zealand Playcentre Federation
Doreen Launder	District Education Officer - Early Childhood Education, Wellington
Bernice Lindegren	Executive Officer, New Zealand Free Kindergarten Union, Wellington
Jean McCombie	Wairarapa Community Action Programme, Masterton
Janet Smith	Community pre-school worker, Lower Hutt
Wilma Smith	Parent of a child who had attended a mobile unit
Kim Spackman	Representative for the New Zealand Free Kindergarten Teachers Association, Wellington
Mary Wood	Head of Department, Early Childhood Education Division, Correspondence School, Wellington
Pam Kennedy [Committee chairperson]	Representative for the Early Childhood Education Division, Department of Education
Evelyn Henry (Gilchrist)	Research Officer, Research and Statistics Division, Department of Education
Shelley Kennedy	Acting Senior Research Officer, Research and Statistics Division, Department of Education

APPENDIX TWO: SOME BACKGROUND DATA ON TEACHERS

Age Range of Teachers

Years	N (teachers)
20-24	3
25-29	4
30-34	5
35-39	2
40-44	1
45-49	-
50-54	2
55-60	1

Years in which Kindergarten Training was Completed

Years	N
1951-52	1
1952-53	1
1960-61	1
1969-70	1
1970-71	1
1972-73	2
1975-76	1
1977-78	1
1979-80	1
1980-81	2
1981-82	1
1982-83	2
1983-84	1
1985-86	1

Where Training was Completed

Name of Institution	N
Auckland Teachers College	2
Hamilton Teachers College	6
Wellington Teachers College	4
Palmerston North Teachers College	1
Dunedin Teachers College	4
(Not applicable - did not complete formal training)	1

Appendix 2 cont.

Total Years of Kindergarten Experience

Years	Number of teachers
1 up to 2	1
2 up to 3	-
3 up to 4	4
4 up to 5	4
5 up to 6	-
6 up to 7	-
7 up to 8	1
8 up to 9	1
10 up to 15	4
More than 15	3

Length of Experience of a Mobile Unit

Months/years	Number of teachers
Less than 6 months	3
6 months up to 1 year	4
1 up to 2 (years)	6
2 up to 3	1
3 up to 4	1
4 up to 5	2
More than 5 years	1

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